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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 36 Issue 3 Spring 2016



GOD'S PROVIDENCE WITH US

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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P.O. Box 292674
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Letters to the editor and all other correspondence may be sent to:

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT MAGAZINE
E-mail: editor@hdmag.org
Phone: 1-877-545-0557

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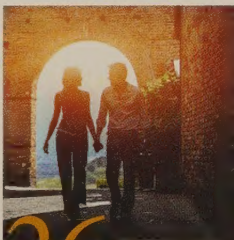
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Spring 2016

Dear friends of Human Development,

The cover of this, our spring 2016 issue, dramatically presents the spiritual excitement, hope, challenge and fear of the discovery of one's vocation. With its characteristic chiaroscuro style of light and darkness, Caravaggio's "Call of St Matthew" contrasts the finger of Christ calling and Matthew's startled glance, pointing his finger at his breast as if to say, "Me? You want me?" This Renaissance painting has taken on special significance in recent years as Pope Francis has mentioned its on-going meaning in his own vocational discernment, to the point that this scene influenced his choice of an episcopal motto twenty four years ago: God's glance of mercy and choice of a sinner for his purposes.

In many ways this dynamic is at the heart of all vocational discernment: God mysteriously intervenes within our minds and hearts and that somewhat vague awareness is confirmed by people and events around us. Like Caravaggio's Matthew we feel both the attractive tug of God yet also the pull of gravity, the weight of our fears, uncertainty and sense of inadequacy.

This issue of Human Development seeks to address vocational discernment within the context of Divine Providence. How much of my life choice is my own free decision? Did God have a specific plan or desire for me? How about the continuing evolution or development of my vocation as I go through different stages of personal health or communal needs? Many authors would be quick to remind us that by its very definition "vocation" implies discovering and responding to a call. No matter on which side of the chair we sit as counsellor or director, we all know discernment is a life-long necessity.

The Council Fathers of Vatican II wisely taught that ultimately there is just one same Christian calling and holiness - to love God and neighbors - and we do so according to the circumstances of our lives as married, single, consecrated religious or clergy. In this issue, we will hear different voices sharing their experience partnering with God's Providence and other companions on the journey. We are called to specific vocations not only for our own salvation but for that of others as well.

As our Editorial Board met and began reviewing essays, we realized we needed an introductory essay that would clarify and contextualize what all the essays mean when they speak of God's Providence and our discernment of His will and vocational desire for us; I accepted the challenge. Msgr. John Strykowski also offers a brief overview of the dynamics of this process by reference to St. Augustine's own life story.

Dr. Susan Muto helps us appreciate the often-overlooked truth that the single life is a true vocation in every sense of the word. Dr. Tim Hogan, a seasoned marriage counselor, offers beautiful insights and touching stories of the vocation of married life. Using imagery from Blessed John Newman's *Lead Kindly Light*, permanent Deacon Owen Cummings reflects on God's providence in his own life experience as husband/father, theologian and deacon. Msgr. Dan Trapp, a Seminary spiritual director and pastor for a quarter century, discusses the call to priestly holiness through relationships, and Adrian Dominican Sr. Maribeth Howell discusses vocational discernment in religious life. Dr. Ed Hahnenberg ties it all together as he shares with us insights on vocation from his book *Awakening*. Finally we also have two short sidebars on providence and vocation from two young Jesuits - Aaron Pierre and John Wronski - in challenging but fulfilling ministerial settings.

Ultimately, as believers we see all our lives as providentially connected and trust that God uses us in ways that far exceed even our own best hopes and dreams. I give the last word to Francis Thompson, a life-long alcoholic who died famous for just one thing - *The Hound of Heaven*. He asked that these words be on his tombstone: "I may not have accomplished anything but I trust God has done great things through me!"

Happy reading,

Msgr. John P. Zeng

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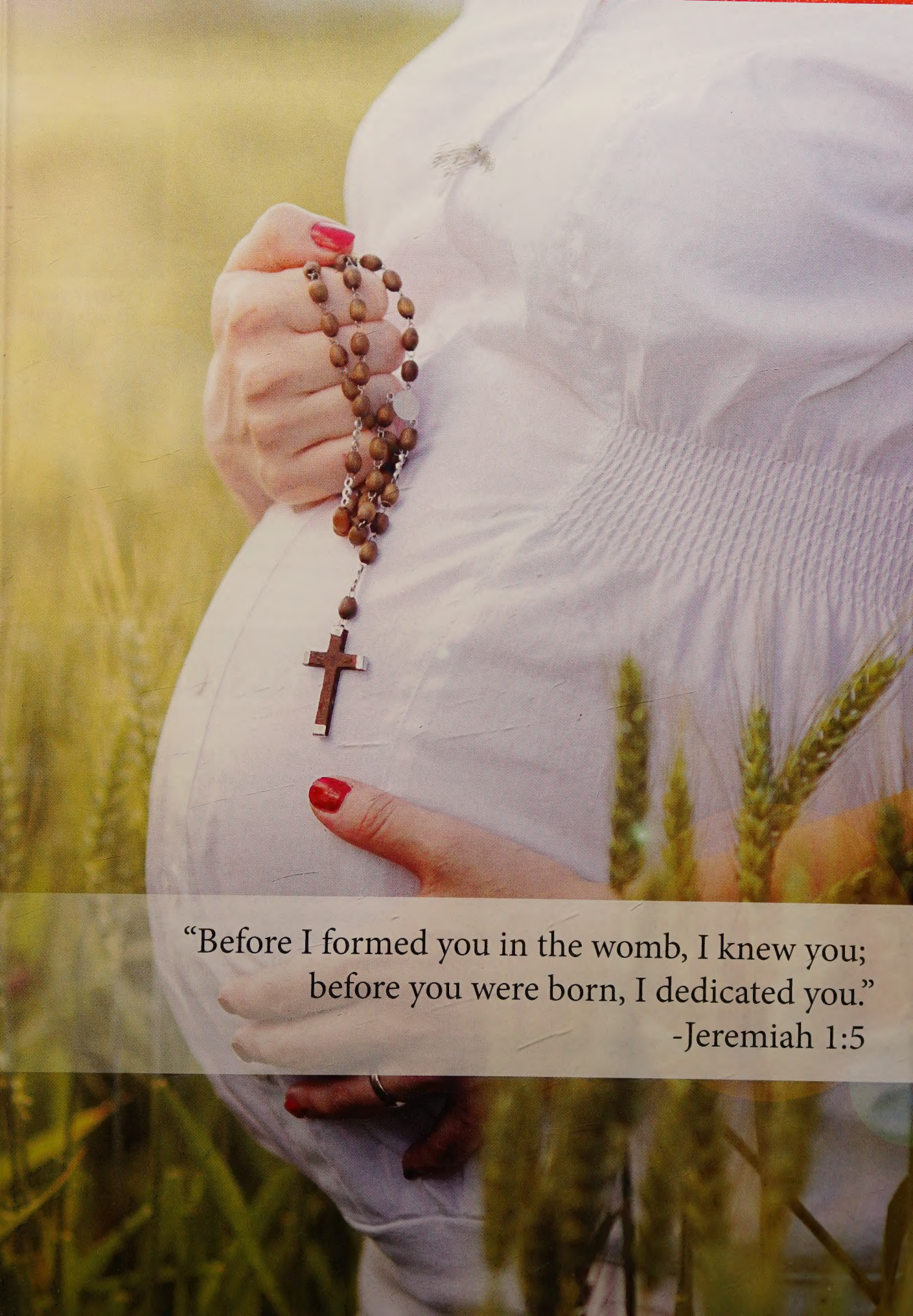
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A photograph of a pregnant woman from the waist up, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. She is holding a wooden rosary with a cross against her bare pregnant belly. Her hands have red nail polish. The background is a soft-focus field of golden wheat under warm, hazy light.

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you;
before you were born, I dedicated you.”

-Jeremiah 1:5

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May 11-13, 2016

Walking with the Wounded Workshop
Guest House – Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

May 20, 2016

60th Anniversary Mass and Luncheon
Guest House Campus
Lake Orion, MI

May 21, 2016

Run Over Addiction-5K Run/Walk
Guest House Campus
Lake Orion, MI

June 1-3, 2016

Walking with the Wounded Workshop
Guest House – Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

June 13, 2016

31st Annual Guest House Golf Classic
Oakhurst Golf and Country Club
Clarkston, MI

July 3-9, 2016

Alumnae ICAP/Guest House Retreat
Carmelite Spiritual Center
Darien, IL

July 11-13, 2016

Summer Leadership Conference
Chicago Marriott Naperville Hotel
Naperville, IL

August 2-4, 2016

Alumni Reunion
La Porte Center
La Porte, IN

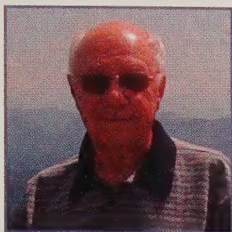
August 7-13, 2016

Alumnae ICAP/Guest House Retreat
Guest House-Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

October 3-6, 2016

Alumni Fall Seminar
Immaculata Retreat House
Williamantic, CT

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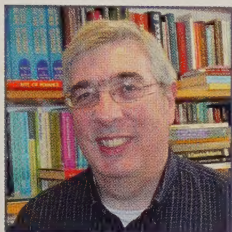
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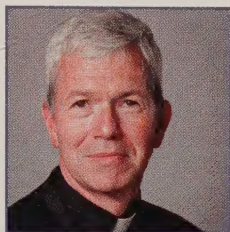
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INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts.

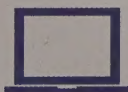
Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under

consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at editor@hdmag.org as an email attachment.

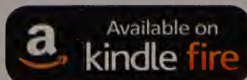
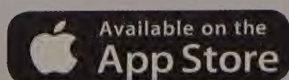


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A DIVINE-HUMAN PARTNERSHIP: PROVIDENCE AND VOCATION

Msgr. John Zenz



The Editorial Board suggested that this issue needed an introductory overview addressing questions that run throughout the essays which follow: How should we understand “providence” and how do we discern God’s will?

The image I offer is “partnership” – between us and God and us with each other. As Samuel Wells points out in *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*, Christianity could be summarized by the preposition “with.” The God of Jesus Christ is not only a loving parent who is for us but even more, a God who chooses to partner with us, complementing our unique gifts and talents, limitations and challenges. Much like Christ washing the feet of His disciples, as God partners with us, He also challenges us to do the same with one another. We experience, understand and discern God’s loving plan or will for us and through us in and through all the relationships of our lives.

PROVIDENCE IN OUR TRADITION

According to the Catholic Catechism, the universe was created “in a state of journeying” toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained. God providentially guides creation toward that perfection. The Creator God has “written” His plan or dream of love within the fiber of all that is; everything and everyone has a particular purpose. Thanks to our free will and ability to reason, our spiritual and human development happen as we partner with God. As in all good partnerships, at a certain point “the two become one” and we cannot easily distinguish the “working” of grace and our efforts. Partnership means we are incomplete without God. For His part, God chooses to depend on our response; to the extent we seek His wisdom and guidance, He partners with us.

Our English word “providence” comes from the Latin “to see in advance.” St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that providence is written in the fiber of all that is and for us; it is an aspect of the virtue of prudence. Providence, therefore, is not only a confident trust that God will provide but also a conviction that He has already provided for us in the working of nature and in our ability to reason. We partner with God as we exercise our reason and follow our deepest, truest desires. According to Aquinas, through prayerful reflection these natural desires become passions and eventually virtuous habits of a person with a well-formed conscience.

We also believe that God’s Spirit is at work in and through the processes of nature. God ordinarily respects the natural attributes of things; He lets water

or wind “be,” and so occasionally storms, hurricanes and floods happen. God works indirectly – most often through secondary causes such as people, nature and even apparent chance occurrences. Physical evils (storms, diseases and disasters) are part of the journey of creation to perfection and quite often “good” things can result from what we might term disasters or tragedies.

We say “God works in mysterious ways,” that is, His plan and action is often hidden and anonymous. Theologians distinguish between the “permissive” will of God that allows many [presumably negative] things to happen and the positive will of God which is clearly an intervention of God. Such a “positive” intervention could be a miracle but most often it would include the normal activities and flow of life.

Moral evils (personal sin and social sins such as abortion, war, racism and violence) are permitted out of respect for human freedom. But even out of the tragedies of sin, God can also bring forth good. For example, out of the greatest moral evil ever committed – the rejection of His own Son – God brought about the redemption of the world. As the saying goes, “God can write straight with crooked lines.”

God’s providence is concrete and immediate. At times we deliberately and consciously cooperate with God’s inspiration by intentional actions, prayers and the serene acceptance of our own suffering or that of a loved one. Sadly, sometimes we freely and consciously resist the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Many times, God even “uses” us in ways that exceed our own intentions. A case in point would be the

“Providence, therefore, is not only a confident trust that God will provide but also a conviction that He has already provided for us in the working of nature and in our ability to reason.”

prophet Jonah – reluctant to preach conversion in Nineveh, eventually he was used for their salvation and his own!

In our Catholic understanding of providence, we seek to find a balance: professing that God has created out of love with an ordered plan for all things while yet affirming our human freedom and responsibility and leaving room for the role of chance that work within nature and people. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests a good metaphor for our relationship with God is “drama.” Although a play has a basic script, the actors make it their own as they interact with one another; the script unravels a bit and the play takes on a life of its own. In this image, the Holy Spirit is the producer on the sidelines giving subtle encouragement but leaving us free to interpret and improvise. As we “zig” or “zag,” God adjusts. We are true actors and God is also an actor with us. In Jesus Christ, God even chose to enter personally into the drama!

Another related image making the same point might be an athletic event: in sports, there are overall hopes for victory according to rules and roles for coaches and players but the course of the game runs its own way, often surprising even the odds-makers! Somehow all of this is under God’s direction and inspiration even though much of it may seem to evolve in a haphazard fashion. The same could be said of music: a composer writes out a musical score but it can vary greatly as each singer interprets it. And then with an opera, musical or choir production there is mysterious blending of voices which is always unique and unrepeatable; although the script is essentially the same, no performance is ever identical. “Partnership” between us and God and us and each other are fluid and constantly evolving.

In summary, providence is not simply a promise on God’s part to be there for us, but a pledge that He is with us – as our partner. His plan of love is written into the fiber of our being and into the very nature

of creation itself. While we cannot control the cycles of nature, we can detect many of them and adjust accordingly. Within ourselves, we have the resources we need to handle most things – intellect and will, curiosity, instinct, desire, mentors, guides, teachers, confessors and spiritual advisors. Our role is to partner with the people around us to discern among the many gifts of God: what does God want of each of us and from all of us? After all, we share together with others in fulfilling God’s will.

SHARING TOGETHER IN GOD’S DREAM

How might we explain God’s will? Is it a pre-set plan, a blue-print to which we must conform? Or is it something evolving and interactive? What does it mean to speak of God’s will as His dream for each of us and for all of us? How “open-ended” might God’s will be? When we pray “Thy will be done,” what do we mean? Are we passively resigning ourselves to whatever God permits or are we perhaps saying “Lord help me to be an instrument of making your will happen this day”?

The first line of an earlier translation of the Prayer of Consecration in the Ritual for the Ordination of Priests proclaimed, “Yours is the well-ordered plan by which our personalities unfold to ever greater perfection...” Although a prayer specifically for priests, these beautiful words speak about a call written in the fiber of every human being. As we pray and discuss, travel and study and interface with a variety of people, we begin to awaken God’s dream, God’s joy latent within us. As events large and small whirl around us, the voice of God wells up within us. We begin to sense a vocational identity; we hear a consistent inner voice of encouragement and affirmation. We also hear words and experience events that seem to confirm our inner awareness.

We begin to understand that it is not “I” alone who am choosing, but rather, I have been chosen by my partner, God, and I am strengthened in that confidence by the support of other partners. It is up

to me to accept or reject God's proposal of love and the wisdom of others.

No life decision is made in isolation: I am who I am thanks to my family of origin and generations of people who formed me as well as my ecclesial family of faith and the wider social culture in which I live and work. Others around me help me understand myself and my gifts – even as I help them recognize and appreciate their gifts. The needs of others often call forth from me resources and abilities I might otherwise have never tapped or developed.

LESSONS FROM THE SCRIPTURES

A classic example of the partnership of God and humanity is the story of Joseph and his brothers: he ended up in Egypt because of the conniving of his jealous brothers but providentially this situation put him in a position to interpret Pharaoh's dreams and ensure wise conservation of grain in the event of a possible impending shortage. When his famine-struck brothers arrived in Egypt in dire need of food, Joseph was well-placed to assist them. Joseph explained to them that all these events had happened because of God's providence: "It was not you who sent me here, but God... you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive." We could say that Joseph's "vocation" emerged mysteriously by his cooperation with God and unfolding events and his willingness to forgive his brothers.

In a similar way, we can recall how Moses was providentially saved from death by the clever machinations of his mother and sister Miriam. Raised within the Pharaoh's household, Moses understood authority in Egypt; he was singularly prepared for his future "vocation" of leadership. His own righteous temper got him in trouble but even that was providential for it paved the way for him to spend 40 years tending sheep in the Sinai where he would encounter the divine presence and discover his vocation to lead God's people through that

same desert on their 40-year trek to freedom in the Promised Land

The classic New Testament example is the Blessed Virgin Mary and the way she was preserved from Original Sin by prevenient grace for the day and hour of the Annunciation. The grace of God and her own person became beautifully and mysteriously conjoined. Such is the hope for every one of us: in our vocational searching, we hope to partner with God's presence, call and gifts for our own salvation and that of others. But even in the case of Mary, let us also note that her "partnership" with God included St. Joseph who freely consented to the mysterious, perhaps disappointing and confusing circumstances. Partnership with God always flows over into the other relationships of our lives.

PROVIDENCE GUIDING OUR VOCATIONS, CALLING US BEYOND OURSELVES

Although we make a "life choice" at a certain point – such as marriage, priesthood, religious life or the single state – that choice needs to be reaffirmed and refined again and again, even on a daily basis. Discernment of God's gracious gifts never ends. Much of our deepening vocational commitment happens out of necessity - circumstances of time and space, questions of health and the needs of family and the Church.

At the core of vocational choice is the question of self-transcendence: how is this commitment calling me beyond selfishness or preferences for my own comfort and security? Decisions truly being made in, with and through the power of the Holy Spirit, should always be "Christ like," that is to say, loving without agenda.

As we said earlier, no vocational decision (initially or on-going) can be made in isolation: vocations are concrete expressions of an ecclesial offering of self. For instance, in spirituality of marriage, a couple marry not only for their own mutual comfort



and support with hopes of raising a family; they also see themselves as living signs of Christ's love for His Body, the Church. Discovery that God is calling one to a life as a single Christian can also be an ecclesial witness and commitment – a sign of the incompleteness of this life and readiness and availability to serve. Obviously the call to consecrated life, the priesthood or permanent diaconate is a decision made by the individual but always and only within an ecclesial process of dialogue and mutual evaluation. Ultimately, as Von Balthasar reminds us in *The Christian State of Life*, within every Christian vocation there is a call to hand over one's whole life to the Lord in and through the Church.

Since a vocation is about a call to serve, we need to be attentive to the needs of those around us. This may at times include openness to being sent to people and places we would not have chosen, taking risks and stretching ourselves beyond the familiar. For those in authority, it means listening to the voices of those for whom we have responsibility: obedience is always "two-way."

The partnership that God models for us is supposed to be put into effect in the way that we work with one another. Again, providence and God's will are to be discovered in and through all the relationships that

shape our lives. My own openness to the voices of all parties will affect each one of them as well as myself. There is indeed a "ripple effect" of every decision that we make. Our actions and decisions (or lack of action) will encourage and motivate others or perhaps scandalize and disappoint them.

And what if I happen to make a "mistake?" Cannot God make a vocation out of mistakes or apparently accidental circumstances? Consider again the story of Jonah. Another example is the short story writer Flannery O'Connor. Extremely limited by lupus, she providentially discovered her vocation as a writer: confined to bed for long hours, she used to dream about characters for her stories. So it is that Flannery O'Connor teaches us "every limitation is a vocation!" As we deal with our own human limits and shortcomings, all the more do we recognize our need for partnership with the Lord and each other.

DISCERNMENT

Discernment begins an attitude of confident gratitude for God's gifts and trust that He truly wants to work with us. The French Jesuit spiritual writer of yesteryear, Jean Pierre de Caussade, wrote of this attitude in his classic, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. He suggests that every moment, every place, every encounter can be "sacramental," that is, a revelation of God. We need to begin

all discernment with such a spirit of child-like confidence and trust.

Secondly, docility to the Lord expresses itself in openness to others through spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Penance. Thirdly, a consistent pattern of prayer is necessary in which we express our desire to hear the voice of God speaking through the people, structures and institutions around us. In the process, we trust that everything has a purpose and nothing is wasted or lost. Even if we make choices that must later be revised, hopefully we can look back and see that we have become a more complete person because of commitments that we have made. We also reach a point of what St. Ignatius of Loyola would call “thinking with the Church” wherein we recognize the presence of God working in the Church at every level and accept as God’s providential “will” even things that may cause us confusion or disappointment. We trust in God’s grace at work even in our own personal failures and limitations and those of the institutional Church.

Vocation, God’s will and appreciation of providence usually come together retrospectively; as we look back over a day, a year, or many years, we see patterns of grace. We find peace with what had once been disappointments or perceived rejections; we “accept God’s acceptance” of ourselves and of all other people.

RETROSPECTIVE INSIGHTS

With steady commitment and a prayerful attentiveness to God speaking within me and around me, we feel the hand of God holding and guiding us, acting and speaking in and through us. Providence literally carries us forward and gives us words and wisdom as the Holy Spirit worked through the early apostles. But in the process we are not passive; we are partners with God and each other.

Insights of Etty Hillesum, the 29-year-old Dutch Jew put to death in one of the Nazi concentration

camp, can be helpful. She speaks about our divine-human partnership in jottings from her notebooks posthumously compiled under the title *An Interrupted Life*. On the one hand she recognizes God’s ultimate greatness and goodness and her ability to make the best of a terrible situation by a positive, hopeful attitude. Yet she also notes that God seems to be allowing the tragedy of the Holocaust to continue. She is content to live with trust in the midst of unresolved ambiguity:

Sunday morning prayer. “Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. I shall promise You one thing, God, just one very small thing: I shall never burden my today with cares about tomorrow, although that takes some practice. Each day is sufficient unto itself. I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. p178.

God provides for us. God provides through us. But most importantly, God’s providence is at work in partnership with us and each other. Such is the Communion of Saints here on Earth and in the world to come.

EPILOGUE

St. John’s Gospel concluded with chapter 21, thought by most scholars to be an epilogue summarizing themes of the gospel. In the same vein I suggest his final chapter is a perfect epilogue for this essay on providence and vocation. Peter and six other

Disciples have been blessed with two apparitions of the Risen Lord but remain uncertain as to their future and the Lord's intentions; Peter in particular is presumably still dealing with his own shame and guilt for having denied the Lord. They go back to fishing but catch nothing all night long. At dawn, the voice of a mysterious stranger suggests where they might cast their net. Human limits meet Divine Providence; they choose to follow the advice being offered; they defer to the stranger. A second time, Providence proposes; the stranger invites them to bring the fish they just caught (with his help!). Providence and openness to grace in this scene paves the way for their new vocational mission symbolized by the catch of 153 fish and dragging the unbroken net ashore. By another charcoal fire, Peter is given the opportunity to experience the Lord's mercy and accept a new mission – to feed the Lord's sheep. Their partnership with the Lord and each other was indeed providential and the story continues each day as we too are surprised by providence and deepened in the joy of our vocation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Msgr. Zenz emphasized that Divine Providence is not only something that happens for us as a sort of guiding light but also a mystery that unfolds in a partnership – that is, providence happens with and through us. Can I think of a time, circumstances or relationship wherein I truly felt providentially God and I were “partners?”
2. Vocational choices – like most choices – are the result of a series of influences and factors; God's providence is subtle – and usually hidden, recognized retrospectively. What factors have shaped (or currently shape) my vocational choices?
3. A vocation is never a once and for all decision but must be reaffirmed and renewed each day. How am I currently open to the mystery of God calling me to new depths in my vocation?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ordained July 1, 1978 for the Archdiocese of Detroit, Msgr. John Zenz received a Doctorate in Spirituality from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1984. He served in various capacities in the Archdiocese including Moderator of the Curia, Vicar General and Episcopal Vicar for one of the four Regions of the Archdiocese. Since 2008 he has been pastor of Holy Name Parish, Birmingham. He became Executive Editor of Human Development Magazine in May 2015.



DIVINE WILL, HUMAN WILL:

A LESSON FROM THE CONFESSIONS OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Msgr. John Strykowski



"OUR HEARTS ARE RESTLESS UNTIL
THEY REST IN YOU."

One of the most often quoted statements of St. Augustine, this phrase describes the unending yearning and searching of the human heart and the heart's ultimate goal: rest in God. But quoting these words is the last phrase of a larger sentence. To understand the full meaning of St. Augustine we need to include the words immediately preceding: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Yearning and searching are intrinsic to the human condition because we are naturally oriented toward Him. God has implanted in our hearts a thirst for meaning, transcendence, and fulfillment and all these things can be found only in God. This insight is not only a teaching of St. Augustine but it is indeed the witness of his very life: he himself was the premier "seeker."

Throughout *The Confessions*, again and again, he acknowledges God's gracious presence in the often turbulent events of his life. Writing at least ten years after his conversion experience in 386 A.D., he rejoices in the way God had guided him even though he was not fully aware of it. While the hand of God was directing young Augustine into communion with Him through Baptism and membership in the Church, there was no pre-ordained, fixed plan requiring certain specific steps in a particular sequence. Prodded by the presence of God within him, Augustine freely steered his own journey toward God through countless decisions and experiences, some positive and some negative, that shaped his life and led to his ultimate surrender to God. God's will was at work in him, but so too was his own free will. Both came together to set the ultimate direction of his life.

In his relentless search he subjected himself to a variety of influences: literary (Cicero among others), religious (Manichaeism), and philosophical (Neo-Platonism). Good friendships were also significant in his search. He was capable of deep friendship, experiencing almost inconsolable grief at the death of a young friend. He is frank in writing of his sexual desires and escapades. When he had to separate from his concubine of many years, he writes that his heart “still clung to her: it was pierced and wounded within me....” This was not a superficial relationship.

When he came to Milan in 384, he was enthralled by the preaching and persona of its bishop, Ambrose. At times, in silence, he observed Ambrose reading quietly, refreshing his mind and seeking out the meaning of the pages before him. His Christian friends impressed him by their virtue and among them he encountered men and women living celibate lives.

A dominant presence throughout his life was his mother, Monica. He writes eloquently of her tears for him and her longing that he would at last be baptized. Always in his consciousness was the fact that he had been destined for Baptism from childhood and he always maintained familiarity with the Scriptures, though in a distorted way during his nine years as a Manichaean.

In her recent book, *Augustine: Conversions to Confessions*, Robin Lace Fox contends that Augustine underwent a number of conversions before the culminating one in the garden. I believe Fox is correct. An overview of Augustine’s life reveals a mind always ready to encounter new ideas and a heart open to friends who effected transformations in his life. Clearly he was also touched deeply by his mother’s untiring concern for him.

Shortly before describing his experience in the garden and the voice that urged him to take up the Scriptures and read, he writes that “the day had come when I stood naked before myself, and my conscience upbraided me.” Conscience was the source of Augustine’s restlessness, his critical assessments of the philosophy and religion he temporarily embraced, his seemingly unending conversations with friends, his dissatisfaction with periods of dissolute living, his persistence in hearing the preaching of Ambrose, and the irrepressible awareness of his mother’s love and concern.

God’s will for Augustine was fulfilled by his Baptism, but the path to that moment was also determined by his own will, prodded through all the vicissitudes of his life by God’s accompaniment, through his conscience. Conscience is God’s voice within us, not simply in those moments when we must decide on some

concrete action, but also as a dynamic force affecting fundamental choices we make in regard to the direction of our lives. Augustine’s *Confessions* are a dramatic testimony to the power of conscience drawn by God but also struggling on that journey to God. Augustine exemplifies the convergence of divine will and human will, a convergence unique in the particularities of his life, but yet a convergence that is ultimately universal.

There are obstacles to God’s will to bring all human beings into communion with Himself. Our human will is constrained by many potential obstacles. I believe the lesson learned from St. Augustine can be juxtaposed with the teaching and witness of Pope Francis. Taken together, Francis today and Augustine of yesteryear can give direction as to how we can overcome these obstacles.

The first obstacle is sin. Very few Christian writers have described the power of sin as well as Augustine. And yet he is also one of the most eloquent witnesses to God’s mercy in his life. For those who struggle today with the bonds of sin and who seek to conform themselves to God’s will, the proclamation of God’s mercy can be a great source of peace, freedom, hope. Pope Francis’ constant embodiment of mercy in word and deed is a great consolation and challenge for us.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes other obstacles to the authentic actualization of the human will: “Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.” (par 1735) This is a realistic assessment of the factors that affect the decisions of conscience and that are not easily overcome. Augustine was subject to some of these factors, but he was slowly – though never completely – rescued from them by the accompaniment of friends and his mother.

Pope Francis’ emphasis on accompaniment, always non-judgmental and patient, sets the tone for pastoral action today.

Today’s world is probably as distracted as was Augustine’s. And yet we can also speak of a new phenomenon, the obsession with things. Already a number of years ago, Erik Fromm wrote “...what we must confront now is the possibility that man is dead, transformed into a thing, a producer, a consumer, an idolater of other things.” Pope Francis, following his predecessors, has pointed to the dangers of a consumerist society. The preoccupation with things makes pastoral accompaniment and action all the more

difficult, perhaps outstripping the plans and programs of even the most creative minds.

Ultimately, plans or programs can never be the whole answer, as Pope Francis often reminds us. Accompaniment means compassionate presence and availability. And perhaps, as with Monica, there must be tears as well. The Pope has on occasion recalled the Motive Mass for Tears in the Tridentine Missal. It was not included in the post-Vatican II Missal, but is echoed in the Prayer over the People for Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent: "O God, grant that your faithful may weep, as they should, for the evil they have done, and so merit the grace of your consolation."

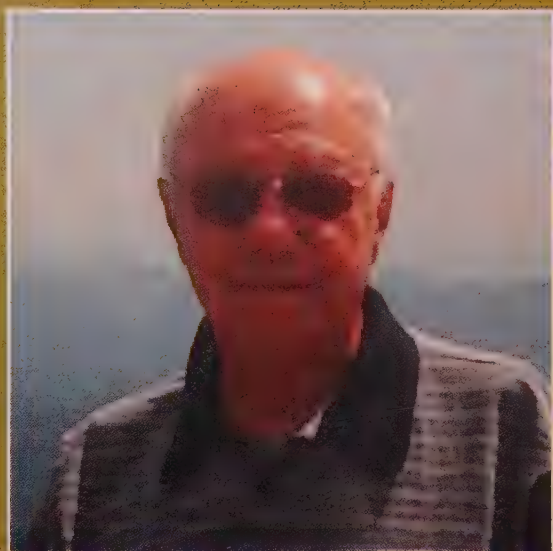
We can shed tears – if not literally, at least metaphorically – not only for our own sins but also for the sins of the world and for all the obstacles humans place in the way of fulfilling the divine will. And perhaps it is most incumbent upon those who exercise the ministry of preaching in the Church to be able to cultivate empathy with the sufferings of those to whom they preach. Augustine was led to conversion by the preaching of Ambrose. The Gospel of joy comes alive when Christians hear compassion and understanding in the voice of the preacher.

God has indeed made us for Himself and we will find perfect rest only in Him. But like Augustine, now we must continue our restless search, allowing ourselves to be pushed forward by our God-driven conscience, and at the same time helping others to find rest in God by our compassionate accompaniment. Day by day, we pray that our human will might come ever closer to the divine will.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Retrospectively, St. Augustine was able to see the hand of God in all his meanderings and even in his failures and sins. Can I see how God has been with me especially in my times of feeling lost or unworthy, confused or angry? Have I encountered God's mercy as I faced the full truth about myself?

2. St. Augustine knew well the restlessness of the human heart; he found rest only when he surrendered to God. How am I restless at this time in my life? Is God perhaps inviting me to "let go" of something or someone?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ordained a priest in Rome December 18, 1963 for the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, Msgr. Strynkowski has served in diverse ministerial settings over the decades – Associate Pastor St. John Cantius, Brooklyn; graduate studies in Rome for his S.T.D. in Dogmatic Theology; service to the Roman Curia in the English Section of the Secretariat of State and in the Congregation of Bishops.

During those years he was an adjunct professor at the Gregorian University and Spiritual Director at North American College. He has served as Professor of Theology and Rector of Immaculate Conception Seminary, Huntington, NY and Pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Maspeth. He has worked at the USCCB in the Office of Campus Ministry and the Office for Doctrine.

He also served as Rector of St. James Pro-Cathedral in Brooklyn. Retired February 1, 2015, Msgr. Strynkowski continues to offer priests' retreats and workshops throughout the country.



THE VOCATION TO THE SINGLE LIFE

Susan Mohn, PhD



Jesus was single – a truth we hardly hear in church. The single life can indeed be a genuine path or vocation, a special spiritual calling, a way of holiness. In this article I will speak to the concerns and needs of single persons in the Church today and how they can be a special blessing in our families and parishes; in their single-state they represent and embody receptivity and availability.

In a society that tends to be couple-oriented, there are many who see their singleness as only a transitional state rather than as a potential lifetime vocational call. Until recently the Church itself, in its prayers, programs, rituals, symbols, readings, and social gatherings, seemed to concur with the feeling voiced by many that being single was more a transition to marriage than a vocation in its own right.

In the research I did to write my book, *Celebrating the Single Life: A Spirituality for Single Persons in Today's World*, I learned already in the 1990's that persons who are single by choice or by circumstance feel at times marginalized, alienated, misunderstood, forgotten, or tolerated and without the equality in dignity everyone deserves. In questionnaires I gave to a group of fifty singles from ages eighteen to sixty, the following concerns came to the fore:

CONCERNS PERTAINING TO ISOLATION AND LACK OF DIRECTION

Society lauds the value of bonding and family affiliation. Why do singles have to be thought of as loners on the outskirts of familial commitment? Why do we treat singleness as a state of life to lament rather than a way of being to celebrate, as a cause for self-pity rather than an expression of other-centered, inclusive love?

CONCERNS REGARDING MINIMAL SUPPORT

Many of the singles I interviewed admitted that they would like the Church to become more proactive toward them by, for example, balancing its "marital mentality" with a complementary blessing of their vocation to the single life. They wanted to be motivated and inspired to deeper faithfulness to Jesus Christ as the model for single living in the world. Most concerns centered on their needs for understanding and spiritual guidance. How could they, as single Christians, maintain their commitment to Gospel values in a world inundated by careerism, consumerism, materialism, hedonism, and secular humanism?

CONCERNS FOR COMMUNITY AFFILIATION

A faith community is important to everyone. Longing

for affiliation with a community is an oft-repeated concern. Many reported moving from church to church and even seeking non-denominational associations to find a supportive faith community. Divorced and separated persons and those with sexual orientations that preclude traditional "marriage" often feel alienated from the institutional Church. Due to the mobility factor built into many career tracks, single persons often lose their communal connections to the extended family and lament not finding in their church a true "faith family."

SINGLENES: LIFE-GIVING AND INCLUSIVE LOVE

Singleness is an option for wholeness, a gift women and men bring to the Church, a capacity for respectful relationships modeled on Christ's own capacity for friendship, a call to inclusive love.

The root of the word "religion" means "to bind together again." Relation is the opposite of isolation. The Church is called by Christ to address every person's need to belong, to be befriended. Such a vision illumines the redemptive role of the Church as a herald of God's saving love for people of every age and situation. The Church is the family of God, many who happen to be married. One lifestyle is not of less or more worth than the other. Every human being is uniquely loved by God and created in His image and likeness.

Our faith tells us that we are formed by God and for God. Before one is a priest or a parent, a career woman or a nun, a person married with children or widowed—one is a single human being, uniquely created by God and called by name. In this regard, I would venture to say that single persons witness to the mystery of transforming love singularly taking place in every person's heart and in the world at large. The point is,

"We are born single and we die single.
...Before we choose any other state of life, we are single."



We are born single and we die single. No one, not even the best of lovers, can die our death for us. Before we choose any other state of life, we are single. We are to celebrate the blessings of our uniqueness within the common bond of our membership in the human community and the body of Christ, his Church.

MINISTRY WITH SINGLES

The hope of the singles I interviewed is that members of the Church dialogue with them to find new ways to be supportive of this vocation with its limits and blessings. In sermons and catechesis, pastors and the people of God ought to address issues of transitional, circumstantial and permanent singleness. Study groups can take up the task of analyzing the demographics of a congregation to see who is in need of this ministry. How many people in the pew are living in traditional family situations or not? Who is reaching out to single people who live together out of wedlock? What about our single elderly? Do we show them the love and care they need? Do we talk and pray about the way to remain a fully sexual man or woman and yet not indulge in sex for pleasure only? How do we help singles to integrate their sexuality and their spirituality and to see that haste loving is a way of life, not an unreachable ideal? There are myriad ways in which our faith community

can offer more support for single persons. Allow me to suggest some practical and effective starting points:

In Prayers of the Faithful be sure to include references to single as well as to married life.

Establish support groups for those who are single by choice or by virtue of transition.

Empower single adults through spiritual conferences, directed retreats, and sound preaching to develop a doctrinally sound approach to sexuality.

Stress the model of Jesus, his capacity for warm friendships with women and men.

Address directly through public forums and private consultations the sexual, social, and spiritual issues associated with separation from one's family of origin, and give special attention to persons in failed relationships, to one-parent families, and to those bearing children out of wedlock.

WHAT SINGLES CAN DO

Single people know that no human institution in and by itself can resolve the problems of loneliness, rootlessness, and an unhealthy questioning of their

lifestyle, to say nothing of the problems associated with uncommitted relationships. That is why it is not enough to ask what the Church can do for singles. We must ask what singles can do both for themselves and for the Church. A good place to begin is to articulate the spirituality of singleness and its practical applications in Church and society.

Before recommending any model of restoration and redemption, it is essential for singles to renew appreciation for their own vocation and to promote an understanding of it. This goal can be reached in three ways:

REFUSE TO CONCEDE TO HAVING AN INFERIOR STATUS IN CHURCH OR SOCIETY

Single persons must try to do whatever they can to overcome prejudices directed at them and to reaffirm their worth and dignity as persons. Similarly, no person should be denied a position or function in society because he or she is single. Issues of justice apply to all, including equality in pay and working hours.

SEEK WAYS TO OVERCOME INJUSTICES LINKED TO NOT BEING MARRIED

This might mean taking a stance against economic structures that show preference to persons who are married rather than single. It may also mean not marginalizing “them” into “singles groups” or efforts to “minister-to-singles” as persons who are “other than” or “different from” the rest of the “church family.”

PROMOTE A SENSE OF INCLUSIVENESS AND AN APPRECIATION FOR ONE’S GIFTS

Warm, vivacious, fully alive, and single people need and want to be included in worship services, committee meetings, parish councils and social gatherings. Singles can become proactive in this regard by offering, for example, to do substitute parenting or grand parenting, to visit the sick and to use their gifts for friendship by reaching out to other marginalized people in the community.

A SPIRITUALITY OF SINGLE LIFE

Thus far we have seen that it is a misconception to identify the single vocation mainly in reference to marriage—as if to be single has no identity of its own. This line of reasoning inevitably relegates singleness to

a second-class position. Because singleness predates marriage or community membership, it must not be defined depreciatively as a state of “not being” but appreciatively as a state of “being” to be celebrated in its own right.

I can vouch from my own experience that it is unwise to allow oneself to drift half-heartedly into the single life without reflecting upon and praying about what it means to find oneself single in the world. Do I see this vocation as a meaningless burden, devoid of life-giving potential, or as an invitation to commit myself to a faith-filled life open to God and others in joyful self-giving? Lacking this kind of reflection, being single can open one to the traps of self-centered preoccupation or sensual indulgence. Hence, even when personal options are limited by circumstances beyond one’s control, one has to choose either to celebrate being single in joyful surrender to God or to grow bitter because of it.

The spirituality of the single life enables one to be more present to others. In married life this outreach of love is admittedly restricted by the primary responsibility to one’s spouse, children, and immediate family. As a single, one experiences a certain latitude in responding to the call to love and serve whomever God sends.

There are several ways in which single persons can celebrate their spirituality, advance their faith, and enjoy the fruits of commitment to Christ.

Love Chastely, Love Generously. To live with Christ is to witness to the wholeness of being a male or female person who manifests self-respect and respect for others. The love singles show if they are growing in intimacy with God ought to be non-possessive, non-manipulative, self-giving, and compassionate. Charity means trying to love others with the love with which God has loved us. Hence single persons in the Church have to set and maintain high standards to exemplify the art of loving.

Be a Friend. Friendship in the single life calls for relaxed detachment from exclusivity for the sake of fostering affectionate, inclusive loving and firm commitment to Christ. The detached yet committed loving characteristic of spiritual friendship is only attainable to the degree that we open ourselves heart and soul to the all-inclusive love of Jesus. Friendship of this sort leads to a quality of encounter that fosters uniqueness of personhood while opening us to the





communal side of life which opens us more fully to God and others. This faith enables us to talk to “soul-mates” about our hopes and fears, our successes and failures. Together we can pray that God will guide the decisions we make and the actions that follow from them. We trust that God will befriend us as we have befriended one another.

Be Open-Ended. The single life has an open-endedness about it that may plunge one at times into ambiguity and puzzlement. We may find ourselves asking in our twenties and again in our forties: “Am I really called to stay single all of my life or is my being single merely due to a set of circumstances over which I had no control?”

Live in Attached Detachment and Detached Attachment. These two dispositions help single people not to give in to the myth of omni-availability, as if they have no life of their own, especially where family members are concerned. One must be willing to convey firmly yet gently to relatives and friends a need for privacy and solitude that ought to be accepted.

Be attached and detached at the same time. After all, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, coworkers, and church members for the most part act out of good will. There is simply a fine line between caring for us and trying to control us.

Recognize One’s Vulnerability and the Need for Forgiveness. All human beings are vulnerable, but the state of feeling broken and in need of healing may be heightened in the single life. We need only to think of the pain occasioned by a divorce that began with a

severe betrayal of fidelity. Nowhere is this vulnerability more obvious than in the sexual realm where single persons out of loneliness often expose themselves too soon to intimate contacts that may yield pleasure but do not offer lasting joy. We must be as gentle towards ourselves when we err as God is gentle towards us. For how is it possible to show compassion for the faults and mistakes of others if we have reserved none of it for ourselves?

The heart of the single person must become more and more one that listens to the needs of others while admitting one’s own woundedness. Compassion of this kind is patient and peaceful, it fosters the gift of spiritual generativity, whether one is a biological parent or not. To touch without crushing, to temper anxiety, to hold tight and know when to let go, to forgive as we have been forgiven—these are the hallmarks of the single vocation Christ calls us to live in the light of his own dying and rising.

CELEBRATING SINGLE LIFE

Living in singleness strengthens our desire to be more receptive to God’s will for us. It increases our courage to stand up for what we believe and not to be caught in churning tides of popular opinion. Christian values will always pose painful questions to a society that mocks commitment. Choosing to live as a single person faithful to the call of Christ means exposing oneself to the possibility of hurt and pain, but also to the grace of hope and peace.

Recall the lives of single Christians like Søren

Kierkegaard, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Flannery O'Connor. Their singleness made them especially available to witness to Christ in philosophical, political, and literary realms. They suffered misunderstanding, but they were not afraid to stand up for what was right and to defend their faith. Such freedom carries with it a high degree of responsibility. One must be ready to proclaim one's beliefs, to take a few extra moments to listen to people and to respect the dignity of everyone. How else can one become a healing presence in a broken world? We can allow God to use us as instruments to bring about this transformation, for in our singleness we are free to flow with God's will in the situation where God places us; we are free to travel lightly and go where God most needs us to be.

As Jesus walked along the road to Emmaus with two seekers, so we must walk with Him by walking with others. By sharing our burdens and sorrows, our blessings and joys and letting them share their own experiences, we companion each other on the way. Together we realize we are all single and unique yet at that same moment never alone. He is with us always!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Muto's article challenges us to see the single state as a genuine vocation, a specific human response to a perceived call/plan/desire of God. How might our parish/community recognize, affirm and support people in the single state? How might our parish show the complementary role and gifts of those in the single state alongside marriage and family?
2. Do I ever think of Jesus as single? Have I ever thought about the fact that we are all "born" single and "die" single?
3. The single person bears witness to the "incompleteness" of life in this world and also stands ready and available for service. How do I "use" my own experience and times of "being single" to "be" available?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Muto, PhD, is executive director of the Epiphany Association and Dean of its Epiphany Academy of Formative Spirituality in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. An expert in literature and spirituality, she aims in her teaching to integrate the life of prayer and presence with professional ministry and in-depth formation in the home, church, and marketplace. Doctor Muto lectures nationally and internationally on many foundational facets of human and Christian formation in today's world. She holds membership in numerous honorary organizations and has received many distinctions for her work, including, among others, the award for excellence in teaching from Duquesne University, a Doctor of Humanities degree from King's College in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, and the Manifesting the Kingdom Award from the Diocese of Pittsburgh.



JOURNEY OF PURIFICATION:

DISCOVERING GOD'S REAL PRESENCE IN THE VOCATION TO MARRIED LIFE

Tim Hogan, PsyD, CIRT

INTRODUCTION: TWO DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE

Mike and Becky walked into my office with a familiar, painful look on their faces. Married for 19 years, they had all the ingredients for a happy life: three healthy children, financial security, friends, religious faith and a commitment to regular participation in their parish. However, while family life seemed to be flourishing, their marriage was largely dead. As business partners they were awesome; as intimate lovers and friends they were sick and dying. As each shared their stories of lost passion and growing resentment they were rocked with sorrow. How could things have gone so wrong?

Mike and Becky were well aware of the lofty words we (rightly) use to describe Christian marriage. Marriage is a divine *calling*, a sacred *invitation* from God to experience God's presence in an intense and transformative way. This is why our tradition understands it to be *sacramental*: This union of man and wife becomes a visible sign and symbol of God's steadfast, faithful, permanent and creative love for people. When people look at married couples they get to see a picture of what God's love looks like.

Sometimes we even get to see a flesh and bones picture of this theological truth. Take my parents, for example. Coming from profoundly different backgrounds, they fell in love, quickly married, then spent 57 years learning how to love well, fight well, make up well and construct an effective partnership. They raised a large family and poured out their lives in the community. A few weeks before my father died I watched him slowly limp down my driveway to his car, supported by my mother's stiff forearm. Before she opened his door he looked up at her with gratitude and they both paused, getting lost in each other's eyes. Their deep love and connection took our breath away. That was it! They had become a real, visible picture of Trinitarian love. Because of their faithfulness to their vocational path, they had become an unmistakable living sacrament and a source of serious inspiration.

Their story is not the norm. Rather, becoming this living picture of Trinitarian love is more often stunningly difficult and confusing. As a young couple stands at the altar we rightly smile and celebrate love that is innocent, beautiful, orgasmic and glorious. But we all know that the day will come when the journey will become difficult, even brutal. If we were honest we would not just stand, smile and wave. We would also fall to our knees and beg God to sustain them on the day when the romantic pixie dust is spent and their deeply human and wounded hearts collide. Those of us seasoned by the transforming work of marriage know that old hurts, abandonments and betrayals, not to mention patterns of habitual self-protection, will eventually bubble to the surface, wreak havoc, and release tears. How the couple responds to this inevitable struggle will determine whether they will become transformed by this divine vocation and end up looking more like my parents, or, like Mike and Becky, get lost along a path of increasing resentment and frustration.

The purpose of this article is to explore the exciting and transformative adventure of the marital vocation. There is reason to be hopeful. Clinical and brain research over the past 20 years has transformed the way we work with couples. I now coach couples to re-enter their vocational calling to transformation in three areas. First, I invite married partners to re-activate and transform the connecting energies of romantic love. Second, I encourage couples to embrace marital conflict as a pathway of growth and transformation. Finally, I coach couples to both study and learn about their partner so as to become the indispensable

“go-to” person who enables the person God brought into their lives to flourish.

ROMANTIC LOVE AS A PATHWAY TOWARD DIVINE TRANSFORMATION

We are now in a historical era where marriage is built upon the foundation of romantic love. Gone are the days when marriage was driven and held together by parents or elders in society as a rational way to maintain stable homes for children, ensure property rights, or control the gene pool. Disappeared is the societal pressure to stay married and/or the public condemnation for getting a divorce. Instead, people typically get married today because they are “in love” and are often encouraged to exit their marriage when they no longer feel “in love” with their partner. Not surprisingly, this new romantic foundation for marriage has not proven to be very stable. Today the divorce rate continues to hover around the 50% mark, and fewer than half of those who stay married report being happy or thriving.

But what does this mean for our understanding of marriage as a sacrament, a divine vocation? Well, it is tempting (and common) to push back against this cultural shift and encourage couples to let go of their longing for romantic love and instead preach the value of the more mature, agape, self-sacrificing love that Jesus came to model for us. I know this is tempting because it used to be exactly what I would say to couples who complained of not being in love anymore. Unfortunately, as it turns out, this is not terribly helpful for couples. And by that I mean it never worked for me. Not even once.

“Romantic love ...is a gift from God. It gives us a temporary glimpse of Trinitarian love. Romantic love activates an intense physiological experience of primitive attachment...”



Attachment research showed me why. While people may go to soup kitchens and on mission trips to serve others; they get married because they desire a loving human connection. And, while self-giving and agapic love does and should flow from a connected and maturing couple, it does not stand well on its own. So, if a couple cannot re-establish any romantic-like emotional connection, then they are simply not likely to stay married. So, rather than only appealing for self-giving and sacrificial love, we do well to better understand and activate the powerful energy from romantic love.

I have found that this process starts by redeeming the value of romantic love. Romantic love is not simply an immature, vacuous and untrustworthy imposter for the real thing. I actually find it to be a gift from God. It gives us a temporary glimpse of Trinitarian love. Romantic love activates an intense physiological experience of deep and primitive attachment, similar to the experience that infants and toddlers have with their caregivers. And so it fills the lover with waves of chemically-induced euphoria, a sense that life now has purpose and that purpose is love. This gives the lover a great capacity to overlook their lover's shortcomings, sometimes to a

fault. (i.e. "I know he just got out of prison and still hasn't divorced his fourth wife, but he is so wonderful!") This experience of raw love and connection is marked by the simultaneous mix of deep connection/familiarity (i.e., "we are one") that is combined with a strong sense of novelty (i.e., "You are a mystery that I long to uncover.") I believe that this chemically-induced state of mind is a gift from God that reminds us that we were made for all-in, Trinitarian-like love above all else. It is the feeling that triggers (or tricks, depending on the situation) lifetime commitment to the marital covenant. It is also an experience that is often needed later in marriage to energize the movement towards healing.

Here's the challenge: Couples on this sacramental adventure of marriage must learn to put the energies of romantic love to work for their marriage, while learning to protect their marriage from the potentially devastating impact of poorly managed romantic energy that could destroy it.

The first challenge is to re-romanticize a relationship by activating memories from the initial (and subsequent) experience of falling in love with their partner. I do this by asking couples to reflect with great detail on the early days of their relationship.

The second step to re-romanticize a marriage involves re-activating the attachment centers of the nervous system. The human body is wired to experience a deep sense of connection with those who are close. These attachment centers are on display every time a small child who is upset stops crying and relaxes in the arms of the parent. The same connection can be stirred to life intentionally when partners increase skin and eye contact, commit to extended hugs and/or kisses and take special care of each other every time they leave or come back together. Even when just running to the store, partners should re-affirm their love, make brief eye contact and ensure each other that they will be back. These small changes can go a long way to "prime the pump" and re-activate the joy and soothing of romantic attachment.

Finally, just as the powerful energies of romance can re-energize a stale or dying marital connection, these same energies can wreak havoc when a partner does not guard his or her heart against other relationships. Attachment research is clear that we are not only vulnerable to the power of romantic love with people who are objectively attractive; we are also vulnerable to fall in love with people who unconsciously remind us of early childhood caregivers. This is a large challenge in our globalized and digitally hyper-connected world today, as married men and women often work together and form meaningful connections. This leaves men and women vulnerable to falling in love with people who are sometimes even more powerful unconscious “matches” than is one’s partner. Therefore, married partners need clear boundaries for relationships with anyone not their spouse who could potentially trigger romantic energy and destabilize the marriage.

Couples who want to embrace the full transformational power of their vocation can begin by attending to their potential to experience deep connection through romantic love. Couples can start by awakening and nurturing their romantic connection with one another. The two best ways to do this are by activating old positive memories and by stimulating the attachment centers of the brain. It is also crucial for partners to guard their hearts against these same forces getting sparked in a relationship with someone other than their partner.

MARITAL CONFLICT AS A PATHWAY OF GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

Just as marriage is the source of intensely pleasurable connection and love, it also produces a diverse array of conflict. Some of this conflict is simply the product of the ongoing necessary friction that naturally flows from things like dividing chores, planning meals and negotiating where to spend Christmas. That level of conflict is common to all relationships. However, marriage usually produces a very unique, deep and intense form of conflict that flows from the subterranean

and complex waters of romantic love and attachment.

My wife, Karen, and I were introduced to this deeper conflict quickly. Soon after marrying we moved from Detroit to Southern California so I could attend graduate school. We were madly in love and excited for this new adventure. Karen quickly became involved with our new parish, as we expected. However, the more involved she became, the more irritable and angry I became. We were frequently in conflict. My emotional distress and anger made no sense. Karen was doing nothing unexpected or wrong. What was going on?

Enter Dr. Harville Hendrix. He offered a virtual “decoder ring” that freed Karen and me to allow our conflict to create a process of healing and growth. Here’s what we learned: While I am blessed to come from a wonderful Catholic family that was very involved in our home parish, this was also where I was (unintentionally) significantly wounded. On many occasions I felt lost and unimportant to my parents because they spent so much time at church. Predictably, I fell in love with a woman (Karen) who also loved serving in her parish. It was not long before I was reliving my childhood wound: Karen was at church and I was at home feeling lost and unimportant. Again. My childhood wounds had been triggered and so my anger with Karen was far more intense than the situation called for. (As we psychologists say, “If it’s hysterical, it’s historical!”) With Hendrix’ wisdom and support, Karen and I were able to explore my marital frustration and connect it with my childhood pain. She was able to help me to heal these old childhood wounds. This was the first of many times that our marriage was doing its job: By creating and triggering pain from childhood, we are able to talk and pray our way to transformation.

Twenty years of doing intense marital therapy has convinced me that Karen and I are not alone. Hidden within the romantic forces that draw couples together are the seeds of this kind of deep conflict. In fact, it is part of our unconscious longing to heal that causes us to

all in love with our partners in the first place. Like the way Solomon and Tatkin (2011) summarize this dynamic: "It is no accident that of all the possible people to choose from, often the person we select to become the center of our world turns out to have an uncanny resemblance to a person who raised us." In other words, we step into our marriages with pre-wired relational maps, patterns and unhealed wounds that were formed by our most powerful attachments with caregivers. The vocational calling into marriage provides the holy and transformative ground to faithfully, lovingly, and consciously embrace these frustrations as growth and transformation trying to happen.

Unfortunately, most couples do not reflexively see conflict as a sign that "growth is trying to happen." Rather, most people feel the pain of conflict as a sign that "I married the wrong person." What, then, is the secret to embracing conflict as a pathway to transformation? I tell my couples who are in intense conflict that they are hanging on a precipice, one step away from the "river of death" that will lead to frustration and resentment, and one step away from the "river of life" that leads to redemption and transformation. Let's take a look at these two fast-moving rivers.

THE RIVER OF DEATH: HOW CONFLICT DESTROYS MARRIAGE

The "river of death" is easy to find. Most people in conflict quickly jump into it by focusing on how others have caused their pain. People do this because the human brain is wired to create a story that essentially always has the same theme: "I am in pain because of something you did to me." Sometimes called the "fundamental attribution error," our nervous system automatically attributes the source of bad things in our lives to our partners, and the good things in our lives to ourselves.

This problem gets worse when people talk about their marital conflict with others. Unless they are careful, talking about marital problems with others when their partner is not with them often strengthens this fundamental

attribution error. This is why marriages typically get worse when partners go for individual therapy, even when the individual therapist is well-meaning and competent. After going outside of the relationship for support and understanding, partners are then more likely to return strengthened in their false belief that their partner is the problem.

This does not mean that partners should not go for individual therapy or spiritual direction when having marriage problems. They should. It often helps. And it is often crucial for wounded partners to feel heard and understood so that they can re-enter the relationship in a creative and constructive way. However, it is important for helpers to ask questions that invite people to allow marital conflict to bring transformation, such as:

"I wonder how this pain reminds you of other pain. Could it also be stirring up old childhood wounds?"

"I wonder, if we looked at a video recording of your conflict, would there be any part of it that you would like to change? In other words, how have you helped to create this nightmare?"

"I wonder what God might be up to. Could this be an opportunity for either or both of you to heal and grow?"

The River of Life: How Conflict Leads to Transformation

On the other hand, couples in conflict are also one short step away from the "river of life." Couples who choose the river of life simply agree to keep their relationship safe, to dialogue about the conflict in ways that are healthy and open and to release the need to find a solution to every problem.

Couples must commit to keeping the relationship safe at all costs. Attachment research has demonstrated that connection and intimacy cannot happen when our nervous system is experiencing threat. So, when threat is in the air, nothing good can happen. This means that couples must agree to protect the relationship, to never hurt

each other intentionally and to soothe each other when the conversations get tense. I also coach couples to periodically re-affirm their commitment to healing while in the middle of conflictual conversations, saying things like “I know this is hard but I am committed to letting God work through this pain so I can learn how to love you better and make our marriage stronger.”

Second, couples confidently step into the river of life if and when they learn how to have healthy and open dialogue. This means that partners agree to share vulnerably and listen actively. This also means that couples are open and curious about how other issues, such as childhood wounds, might be fueling the current conflict. I coach couples to practice “throwing a catchable ball.” This means that partners work to share their pain in ways that are “catchable.” For example, when Karen and I were working through our conflict I needed to learn to say “I don’t know why but I feel incredibly hurt and angry when you leave me here to go serve at church,” rather than “What is wrong with you? You act like you don’t even want to be married to me anymore. All you do is serve at church!” As you can see, the second way is not very “catchable”!

Finally, couples need to accept that not every conflict has a satisfying solution. Sometimes couples deeply and authentically disagree about very important issues. This does not mean, as many think, that such couples have “irreconcilable differences” and should divorce. In fact, John Gottman’s (1999) now-famous research found that the “masters of marriage” do not resolve 69% of their disagreements. Instead, they continue to focus on the positive aspects of their relationship without the unrealistic expectation that they will find a way to resolve every conflict.

Taken together, conflict is not the enemy of a good marriage. Rather, it is an invitation to allow God to heal our inner world and transform and strengthen the marital covenant. This can happen when couples are able to move into the “river of life,” protecting their

relationship and communicating openly without the pressure to always find a solution.

MARRIAGE: THE VOCATION OF “LIVING IN EACH OTHER’S CARE”

“Never forget that you are in each other’s care.”

These words changed the way I work with couples, and I repeat them relentlessly to my clients. I believe that “being in each other’s care” might be the best summary of what it means to embrace the vocation to married life. I first heard these words from Dr. Stan Tatkin (2011), the founder and creator of the Psychobiological Approach to Couple’s Therapy (PACT). Tatkin’s vision for marriage puts flesh and bones on what it means to live the divine vocation.

When couples accept that they are “in each other’s care” love stops being a general idea or set of philosophical principles and becomes a specific and passionate journey of becoming an expert at loving one person well. This means that married people get to spend a lifetime in “the school of their partner,” curiously exploring the sacred mystery of their partner and using what they learn to love their partner in deeper and more powerful ways. I call this learning process “writing your partner’s owner’s manual.” There are four components to this process.

First, partners must approach their vocation with a sense of awe and mystery. Marriage is always holy ground. No person is ever fully knowable. Made in the image of God, every partner is first and foremost a “sacred other.” This helps to correct the temptation married partners often have of thinking “I know just what he’s like and he’s never going to change.” This is the most destructive, false and self-fulfilling belief a person can have about their spouse. Rather, when spouses remember that their partner is made in God’s image and because of that is filled with mystery, possibility and the unknown, it is much easier to activate curiosity to lovingly explore what makes one’s partner tick.



Second, being in each other's care means that partners have the chance to become each other's number-one encourager, cheerleader and reminder of each other's original blessing. Life is difficult. Not only is it full of external stress and pressure, but most people live with an inner critic that constantly calls into question the reality that they are God's beloved child. Couples have the chance to do this for each other. To help couples to master this I coach them to frequently create a gratitude inventory involving their spouse. I guide them

to notice every small way their spouse brings goodness or blessing to the world, from the big things (i.e., "I love the way you lead your team at the office.") to the little things (i.e., "I love how kind you are to the clerk at the store.") Even further, I encourage people to learn specifically what works to cheer their partner up when they are down, to reassure them when feeling insecure and to motivate them when discouraged.

Third, being in each other's care means that

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partners get to know each other's stories so that they understand each other's vulnerabilities, insecurities and needs for ongoing healing. Everyone shows up to their marriage with old disappointments, hurts and losses that have not fully healed or resolved. Partners have the opportunity to learn this landscape of each other's inner lives. It is particularly helpful for couples to learn what their partner needs when in emotional pain. Some people need to talk. In fact, the more upset they get the more energy they put into talking. Others like to withdraw and get their thoughts together. In fact, the more distressed they become the more they feel compelled to withdraw. Hendrix and Hunt (2013) call the first group "hailstorms" and the second group "turtles". As you might expect, turtles tend to marry hailstorms and drive each other crazy. Thus, when working with someone in therapy or spiritual direction it can be helpful to invite them to consider how they and their spouse need different things when in emotional pain.

Finally, being in each other's care means taking the adventure of discovering what brings one's partner to life. Partners can get at this by asking good questions about past fun memories, current desires and future dreams. Learning these things helps partners to activate positivity and enjoyment with each other. This also allows couples to take exciting risks and design new adventures with each other, from traveling the world to exploring new and creative dimensions of their sensual connection.

Taken together, engaging the vocation of marriage invites couples to be authentically in each other's care. This allows partners to effectively write a personal owner's manual for their spouse. This sacred text guides them to skillfully and lovingly become the best person on the planet to both appreciate and love their partner.

Living out the vocational adventure of marriage is difficult. I have suggested three opportunities for couples to embrace this spiritual adventure. Couples can begin by re-activating their emotional connection,

both re-romanticizing their relationship and by initiating their design for attachment. Second, rather than viewing conflict as a sign that something is wrong with their marriage, couples can embrace conflict as an opportunity for growth and transformation. Finally, the vocation of marriage can be captured by the encouragement to "never forget that you are in each other's care." As couples move in this direction, they more and more become a divinely constructed picture of Trinitarian love and an encouraging image of God's persevering loving kindness for humanity.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Hogan speaks of Christian marriage as a journey of purification; romantic love can take on new meaning and depth as a couple go through the seasons and challenges of life and especially conflict. As a married person, how have I found conflicts as occasions to experience healing of each other and even to encounter the Lord? As one not married, could the insights of Dr. Hogan about transformation through conflict apply to my life in community, in ministry or in friendships?
2. In his own marriage and in working with other couples as a therapist, Dr. Hogan has found a helpful phrase: "Never forget you are in each other's care." Regardless of your state of life, how might that saying apply to relationship(s) in your life?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tim Hogan is a psychologist and Certified Imago Relationship Therapist who co-authored *How to Find the Help You Need*, a guide to psychotherapy and spiritual direction, and recently released an album of guided meditations, *Awakening Your Heart* (iTunes). He directs The Grace Counseling Center in Detroit. He lives in Plymouth, Michigan, with his wife of 27 years and three children. Tim's weekly blogs inspire us to transform our desires and deepen human connections. He blogs at DrTimHogan.com/my-blog/. He contributed to RCL Benziger's Family Life series.



THE VOCATIONS OF MARRIAGE, THEOLOGY AND THE DIACONATE

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Owen F. Cummings



CALL AND RESPONSE

Prior to Vatican II (1962-1965)

"vocation" would have been understood by most Catholics as almost exclusively a call to the priesthood or religious life. That has changed. The Constitutions and Decrees of the Council have brought a new and more expansive understanding of the Christian vocation as a calling for all the baptized to share in Christ's three-fold ministry of word, worship and service. Dominican theologian Timothy Radcliffe captures the sense of this sea change: "Each life is a vocation, shaped by our response to the voice that we first acknowledge, perhaps, at the font, but which keeps on calling us" (Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation, 60). Two characteristics in particular stand out from Radcliffe's words: first, "each life is a vocation," and second, the voice of God "keeps calling us."



That each life is a vocation flows from chapter five of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "This holiness of the church is shown continuously, and it should be shown, in those fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many different ways in the lives of those individuals who in their manner of life tend towards the perfection of charity and in so doing are source of edification for others" (par. 39). The Constitution goes on to speak about growth in holiness specifically for bishops, priests, vowed religious, Christian married couples and parents, and those who are crushed by poverty, weakness, disease or various other hardships (par. 41-42).

Each Christian, and arguably each human being, lives out a response to the call of God. Scrolling back through this rich text, we come to paragraph 29 of the Constitution on the Church, which is the magna carta of the permanent diaconate. There the Council embraced the proposal to restore the permanent diaconate around the three ministries of Word (preaching and teaching), Sacrament (especially assisting at the Eucharist), and Charity (understood broadly, in terms of charity and work-for-justice, but also ecclesial administration).

GETTING HELP FROM JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

In 1991 my family and I left England to come to the United States. I had been a theology

professor at Newman University in Birmingham, England. As a parting gift, a friend gave me a silver image of Newman's cardinal hat on which were engraved the words, "Memorare Newman," "Remember Newman." That encouraging but challenging gift and expression has helped me frame my own vocation journey. I quote from Blessed John Cardinal Newman's *Journal* of 1869: "I suppose everyone has a great deal to say about the Providence of God over him. Every one doubtless is so watched over and tended by Him that at the last day, whether he be saved or not, he will confess that nothing could have been done for him more than had been actually done --- and every one will feel his own history as special and singular."

Behind these fine words of Newman lies a fundamental conviction that God loves every human person. Therein lies the essence of "vocation." The acknowledgment and discernment of this vocation in the life of the individual is the doctrine of Providence, the doctrine that God is with us through thick and thin, or, as the Rite of Marriage puts it, "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health," until death brings us to our final homecoming in God.

"Providence" is never entirely clear to us as we make our way through the immediate intricacies of life. Providence is not helpfully understood as God manipulating the course of events for us from outside, so to speak, but is better thought of as God inviting us to recognize and respond to

him as “the within of our within.” The ordinary outward course of daily events is recognized as providential by us in the measure that the divine presence is perceived within. As we move along in life, it is both healthy and good to look back over the years and “see” the hand of God at work, not as a Divine puppeteer but as the hand within us, leading, guiding, nudging, inviting perception of his transforming presence. This is especially important when looking back over our life’s difficulties and challenges.

Blessed John Cardinal Newman’s poem of 1833, “The Pillar of the Cloud,” is particularly helpful. When Newman entered into his journal the passage cited above, he was sixty-eight years old, and he was looking back over the course of what had been often a difficult life. From his retrospective glance and life-review, he became all the more certain that God was always with him.

Newman had spent the first forty-five years of his life as an Anglican, and the last forty-five years were to be spent as a Roman Catholic. When he left the Anglican Communion, many of his friends and colleagues wondered why he had done so, and their amazement was not always expressed in a kindly fashion. When he became a Catholic, there were those in the Church who entertained suspicions about his orthodoxy. Newman was often misunderstood, maligned and hurt. The poem was so personal to Newman that when it was put to music it seems never to have been sung in the Birmingham Oratory during his lifetime. Here is the text:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home ---

Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene --- one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor pray’d that Thou
Shouldst lead me on.
I loved to choose and see my path, but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will; remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on,
O’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

The first stanza of the poem acknowledges the gloom in which we can often find ourselves, the sense that things are dark and confusing, and that life is difficult; yet he continues to ask God to lead him on. While I do not presume to measure up to this prayer request on a daily basis, I want trust in God’s providence to be the perduring basis of my life and my vocation.

A LIFE IN A FEW PARAGRAPHS

By the time this reflection goes to print, I shall have been a permanent deacon for almost twenty-seven years and I have been teaching theology for the best part of forty-three years. This essay reflects my experience as deacon, husband-father and theologian. I cannot remember when I was not interested in the Church, in religion, and in theology. As a cradle Catholic born in 1948 in the West of Scotland, I went to Catholic elementary and middle schools, and then proceeded to a Passionist juniorate for my high school years. The high

“Providence is not helpfully understood as God manipulating the course of events for us from outside... but as God inviting us to recognize and respond to Him as “the within of our within.”

school curriculum was very classical and very traditional and I loved it: English literature, Latin, Greek, mathematics (well, maybe I didn't love mathematics too much!), Gaelic, French, history and geography. No science! Clearly the lack of science in the curriculum was a serious deficit in some ways, but I relished the training in the classical languages, in English literature and in history.

After a year in a Passionist novitiate I was an undergraduate in Semitic languages at University College Dublin. Wonderful years 1966-1969, in the immediate wake of the Second Vatican Council, in which my love for language was further deepened with the study of Hebrew, Syriac and Hellenistic Greek. Study for the BA was not simply philological but also involved culture, history and theology. I left the Passionists after simple vows but went on to study graduate theology at the Milltown Institute of Philosophy and Theology and also at Trinity College Dublin.

I was the first Roman Catholic to graduate at this Anglican school of divinity since its establishment in the sixteenth century by Queen Elizabeth I. The kindness and care of the Anglican professors kindled in me not only a respect for the Anglican tradition but also a love for Anglican theology. This love was enriched and deepened by the fact that the external examiner during my time was none other than Professor John Macquarrie of Oxford University. John Macquarrie (1919-2007) went from being my examiner to my friend, and his great corpus of theological writings continues to sustain and to companion me.

I was married during those years of graduate study in theology to Cathy, an exchange student at Trinity College from Miami, Florida. We have five children. Having taught high school for a couple of years, I became an assistant professor of theology – and ultimately full professor – at a Catholic school, Newman University in Birmingham England, while simultaneously studying for another postgraduate degree in systematic theology in the Presbyterian faculty of divinity at the University of Glasgow, Scotland.



My formation in theology has been thoroughly ecumenical and I am so grateful for that.

In 1989 I was ordained as a permanent deacon by Archbishop Maurice Couvé de Murville in St. Chad's Cathedral Birmingham. Our family came to the United States in 1991 to Salt Lake City, and it is in that diocese that I am incardinated. I worked at the Cathedral of the Madeleine until 1996 when I was invited to teach theology at Mount Angel Seminary, a Benedictine school some fifty miles south of Portland, Oregon. This is where I remain and these twenty years have been in many ways the happiest years of my life.



I don't know if I always loved "the garish day," as Newman has it in the second stanza of the poem, but pride did rule my will so often. With Newman I want to pray, "Remember not past years."

THE VOCATION OF TEACHING THEOLOGY

It is impossible for me to think of theology a nine-to-five job. The fact of the matter is that I love theology. Being able to study and teach theology, especially in this Benedictine milieu, never ceases to thrill me. The community of monks and scholars with whom I work have become my friends. Some words written

by Anglican theologian John Macquarrie to introduce a book I published on his theology in 2002 come to mind: "Although the author describes me as a 'master' of theology, I have told him that we are both 'students' of the subject. What has happened is that theology has mastered both of us, so that we have been caught up in the lifelong task and joy of seeking better to understand, expound and respond to the Christian vision of life." Macquarrie is right. Theology has mastered both of us, though him in a far more eminent degree. Imagine doing what you love to do and getting paid for it!

Preaching and teaching would not be meaningful or effective without the ongoing study of theology. This is also true of poetry and literature. Reality demands that I acknowledge the tensions of trying to "do" theology. Married with children obviously makes great demands on your time. It is simply not possible to give over your evenings to the study of commentaries on Scripture, anthologies of the Syriac fathers or volumes of Rahner, Balthasar and all the 'greats.' Nonetheless, looking back I would not have changed anything. Juxtaposing the study of theology with parenting is a marvelous way of keeping theology real. It is a constant reminder that the entirety of God's lovely world is graced, and that responding to the needs of a small child or an adolescent teenager is just as theologically important as writing a book; indeed, far more enriching!

On the very day that our family left England to travel to Salt Lake City, I remember driving out of the garage and as I did so my eyes found a childish scrawl chalked on the wall of the garage. It read: "Daddy, will you come out and play with me?" Of course, I played with the children, took them to school, made school lunches, went to their music performances and nativity plays and was thoroughly involved in their growing up. But those words stung. There were always lectures to prepare, assignments to grade, conferences to go to, publishing deadlines to meet, and so forth. The vocation of doing theology as a parent must also be balanced by the vocation of doing parenting as a theologian. Here too, with Newman, I ask God, "Remember not past years."

THE VOCATION OF A PERMANENT DEACON

I love being a deacon in the Church, and I treasure with great fondness memories of working with married couples, parents preparing for the baptism of a baby, or sitting with the dying, and assisting at Eucharist. Certainly there were times when I took on too much and that led to difficulties in our family. There were occasions - even special occasions - when I was not with the family because of Church responsibilities. There is a hierarchy of needs and of pastoral importance, and it is essential for deacons prudentially to discern this hierarchy so as not to neglect their wives and families. Self-gift, self-donation is the very essence of the diaconate, and the deacon is called to be the sacrament par excellence of self-donation in his community. If the deacon is married, as the majority of permanent deacons are, he is called first to en flesh this diaconal service to his spouse and to his family.

THE VOCATION OF THEOLOGY AS A DEACON

In this part of the reflection I want to bring together the three aspects of my vocation - as a husband and father, as a theologian, and as a deacon. They come together for me in the doing of theology. As noted, I have been very fortunate in my vocation of being a theologian. My professional life provides me opportunities for reading, writing and preparing classes. Yet in a very real way, every deacon is called to be a theologian.

Most will not have the graced circumstances that I have, but all deacons are called by the Church to continue their study of theology in the exercise of pastoral ministry. The question should not

be framed as a choice between theology or pastoral work, but, rather, "How is my pastoral work informed by solid and continuing study of theology?" Theology is a solemn engagement to developing over a lifetime the gift of Christian curiosity about God and the things of God. That is what our people expect of us. People do not expect deacons to study and absorb detailed and theoretical discussions of specialized aspects of theology. But they do want him to be aware of the tradition and fresh in the way he presents it.

As one Methodist theologian, Frances M. Young, has put it, "If the Christian community is to witness to the reality of God's presence in the world, it needs ministers and clergy who accept the daunting but exciting task of theological inquiry."

Recently a pastor of a busy city church told me that as he was expecting a newly ordained deacon in his parish, he installed a set of bookshelves in the deacon's office. When the new deacon arrived, he brought no books other than the rituals for the celebration of the sacraments. The pastor thought, "Well, maybe his books will arrive on the shelves as he settles in." They never did arrive; the shelves remain vacant. A great sadness.

NEWMAN'S LAST STANZA

Living with the great joys accompanied by the occasional tensions of the three vocations as a husband-father, theologian, and deacon constitute the story of my life. Behind each vocation and looking backwards I can discern the providential presence of God throughout the journey. In the final stanza of his poem Newman is reassured of God's guiding hand and grace: "So long Thy power hath blessed me, sure it still will lead me on." As we recognize God's providential guiding hand, we grow in confidence in His

"Self-gift, self-donation is the very essence of the diaconate... If the deacon is married... he is called first to en flesh this diaconal service to his spouse and to his family."

continuing care. The vocations of marriage, of theology and of the diaconate provide the framework for my daily attempt to respond to God's call, and with God's grace, I intend to remain faithful to all three until that morn when I hope to smile with angel faces.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Deacon Cummings found Blessed Cardinal Newman's 1833 poem/prayer/song, "Lead Kindly Light" a touchstone for describing the ways God's providence had guided and used him. Reflecting on my own life-story with that same hymn, how do I see God carrying me along especially in times of gloom and confusion?
2. Deacon Cummings' own journey allowed him to experience several "over-lapping" vocations – as a permanent deacon, husband/father and a theologian/professor. He sees them interwoven by his deep interior quest for God as the source of truth, the perfect lover and servant. Might I look at my own self and find how all the different aspects of my person and service have a common thread of searching for intimacy with God?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Deacon Cummings is a permanent deacon to the Diocese of Salt Lake City, Utah. He and his wife Cathy have five children. He enjoys a Doctor in Divinity from the University of Dublin, Trinity College and serves as academic dean at Mount Angel Seminary St. Benedict, Oregon.



THE VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD: PROVIDENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Msgr. Dan Trapp

For twenty five years, I have been privileged to serve as a spiritual director assisting men as they discern God's will at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. I have been particularly blessed because for twenty of those years, I have also been the pastor of a small parish near the Seminary. The joy of the priesthood about which we speak in the Seminary is a gift and blessing I experience very directly in relationships with parishioners at St. Augustine/St. Monica. The exercise of priestly service in the Seminary gives me a strong sense of spiritual fatherhood; being a parish priest closely connects me with the joys and sorrows of the cycle of life. The joy of all these relationships – both in the Seminary and at the parish – come to life through Jesus, with Jesus and in Jesus.

As a ministerial priest – in whatever setting I happen to be – I share with the baptized in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. As the Council Fathers of Vatican II explained a half century ago, there is a beautiful, necessary and effective complementarity of our roles and ways of sharing: “The ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and governs the priestly people; in the person of Christ he brings about the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people. The faithful in virtue of their royal priesthood, share in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, self-denial and active charity.” (LG10)

A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

Every Christian – by virtue of Baptism – enjoys a sacramental relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior. By the way we live our faith we come to know Jesus in a unique and intimate way. Again there is complementarity between priestly life and ministry and the vocation of the laity and religious: to know and love the Lord and to share His life means knowing and loving every member of His Body.

In this article, I will be focusing on the priestly vocation. From the outset however, I wish to set as a context a comprehensive vision of the one body of Christ and how each vocation supports and builds up the Church and is a life-time for an intimate, joyful encounter with the Lord.

Almost fifty years ago, Blessed Paul VI wrote that the Latin Church chooses her priests from among those called to celibacy. This call to celibacy is a call to intimacy with the Father, a lived sharing in Jesus' relationship with the Father. (See *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 23). When a man is young as a celibate, very often the focus of the relationship is on following Jesus as Lord and leader. With time and prayer he discovers that life in Christ is a life in relationship with the Father, through the Holy Spirit, sharing in their Trinitarian love. He discovers that he does not stand alone before the Father, but, as a member of Christ's Body, he is related to the Father in an ecclesial way.

That lived knowledge leads to a deeper sense of being in Christ, of being essentially caught up in the relationship of Jesus with the Father. That sense and experience allow the man to "exhale," to perform his ministry with joy and grace. His relationship with God renews others even as he himself is energized by their gifts and needs. This sense of being "in the Son," being the beloved Child of the Father, is available to all the baptized.

THE GIFT OF SELF

As Christ makes Himself known to us in the breaking of the bread which is His Body and in the sharing of the cup of His Blood, all Christians are called to the "real presence" of "self-gift" in all our relationships – in marriage and family, in the single life, in the life of consecrated religious and as priests.

In all the giving and receiving of Christian living, there is a common challenge: remembering that all love flows from God; our primary role is to be the recipient of God's love. Once we have received that love and it has taken hold of us, then we can give our body and spirit back to the Lord and to one another in committed, chaste relationships.

As St. John Paul II taught, within every gift there is a "law of the gift": that law of self-giving, written in each of us is a kind of *munus*, (gift) which also includes responsibility. We have the capacity and the responsibility to love and be life giving. The capacity and duty to love means that in order to be our true selves we have to love. The love with which we love is ultimately God's love; like all Christians, celibate priests love because we are constantly receiving His love.

Unique to celibate love and consecrated chastity is the commitment to consecrate genital sexuality to the Lord for the sake of availability to and for the Church. The very offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice can be for a priest a further expression of his self-donation so that he can proclaim with Christ and for Christ: "This is my body... This is my blood." He brings to the mystery his own "real presence" and his daily, existential hunger and thirst for intimacy. The "emptiness" of the state of consecrated chastity or celibacy creates a space for receiving God's love in a very unique way: openness for God and all others; loving as Christ loved without any agenda except the well-being of the other: "gift-with."

The prayer of the celibate priest can be enhanced and deepened by humble acceptance of his loneliness and incompleteness. A great peace and fulfillment can come in and through prayer that flows from the body and soul of the priest. After acknowledging to ourselves the affective movements going on within us, we tell the Lord, as we would a friend, what we are experiencing. Then the priest can receive from the Lord whatever He would like to communicate. This movement to total openness takes great humility on our part; many people simply pass by this moment by taking control. The loving movement here is to allow God to respond however God chooses. Sometimes, the Lord gives us an interior word or consolation. Often, that word or consolation comes later, when reading the Scriptures

or in a ministerial conversation. At other times, we simply know we have been heard and that the Lord has elicited truth from us. The final movement in this prayer is to release to the Lord all that is in our hearts.

THE EUCHARISTIC GIFT

Every Christian knows the consolation of being nourished by the Lord's presence in the Eucharist; it is a primary mode of intimacy with Him and His Body the Church. Our physical and psychological emptiness is filled with a deep sense of presence; in our apparent isolation we discover connection and solidarity. As this dynamic happens for all who share in the Lord's Body and Blood, a priest finds these gifts abundantly as He stands "in persona Christi Capitis" (in the person of Christ the head): He is hungry but also capable of nourishing and being nourished. Empty, humbled and aware of weakness, yet radiant by the gift of Christ flowing through his poverty, along with his congregation, the priest worships in spirit and in truth.

Through his own humility, Jesus leads the priest and shapes in him a heart capable of pastoring others in the same way Christ did – by healing mercy. The full stature in Christ comes through the Liturgy when we offer the sacrifice of Divine Love and know it as completely a gift, unmerited and profoundly needed. Awareness of the greatness of Christ hallows the priest to make him worthy to lead Eucharistic worship.

...SHEPHERDING

One of the joys and jobs of the priest is to be a shepherd. To accompany and lead God's people is a great grace. One of the men discerning the priesthood some time ago asked the Lord if he was called to the priesthood. What he heard back in prayer was, "I want my people back." Those words corresponded to the deepest desires that the man experienced in his own heart. He received the clarity which he had sought: he should be a shepherd.

...PREACHING

According to the Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life from Vatican II, first among the ministries of the priest is preaching; calling the community together by Christ's Word makes them capable of worship

and service. Through priestly ordination, we are configured to Christ the Teacher. We receive the office to teach as presbyters and we receive charisms to fulfill that office.

AFFECTIVE MATURITY

More recently, the Church has been more clear about the need for "affective maturity" in priests. In the past twenty years or so, both the universal magisterium and our own Bishops' conference have used the term – with different nuances – as a benchmark for readiness for fruitful and fulfilling ministry. In documents on Priestly Formation from Rome, affective maturity is generally understood to refer to the maturity of our affections – that is, our affections should find their fulfillment in Christ Himself. Spiritual directors, formators and counselors have the privilege of guiding seminarians to ask themselves: Do I love Jesus Christ? Is my love for other persons connected to and in balance with my primary love for the Lord and my conviction of His love for me?

In documents on priestly formation from our own Bishop's Conference, affective maturity often refers to a person's having a balanced emotional life of an adult. So, a priest or seminarian who is frequently angry needs to focus on the reasons for his anger to deal with the perceived injustices in a way that leads to a more effective engagement with others. On the other hand, someone who appears emotionally flat needs assistance to see if that appearance is a matter of temperament, or if there is some blockage to mature relationships. Conversely, a seminarian or priest who is always cheerful – but in a high strung key – probably needs counsel in order to have a more honest affect.

With a balanced affective maturity, the seminarian or priest is able to integrate in a harmonious manner the other pillars of life-long ministerial formation and service: on-going intellectual formation, spiritual growth and ever-fresh pastoral zeal. When a man's affective maturity is rooted in Christ, the demands and sacrifices of ministry and the challenges of celibate living become joyful opportunities. Pastoral ministry brings peace and fulfillment for the minister as well as those served. Intimacy and the joy of being loved by the Lord become the energy to fuel the service of others; the very act of serving brings

new intimacy with the Lord and those with whom we
serve and those we are privileged to serve.

CONCLUSION: GOD'S PROVIDENCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Every Christian enjoys the same vocation: not just
to follow Christ's teachings but to share His life. We
share so intimately of this communion of lives that
we become one body and one spirit – with Him and
each other. The priestly vocation is a calling within
that universal calling of Baptism, a unique way of
living communion with the Lord and His Body. In
the providence of God, a ministerial priest comes
to know and understand his vocation by reflecting
prayerfully on all the relationships of his life – his
sacramental bond with the episcopal order and
his brother priests, his bond of loving service with
and for consecrated religious and parishioners. In
this sense, priestly spirituality is deeply ecclesial: like
Christ, with Christ and for the whole Christ, the
priest empties himself that he might – at one and
the same time – know and satisfy the hungers of the
human heart.

By his own state of emptiness and openness to
receive, he can discover the mysterious joy of the
Holy Spirit drawing him, and all those with whom
and for whom he serves, into the communion of God
himself. God's Providence works within the heart
and soul of the priest to fulfill the beautiful words of
the former translation of the opening words of the
Prayer of Consecration at Priestly Ordination: "Yours
is the well-ordered plan by which our personalities
unfold to ever greater perfection..."

As the priest depends upon God's Providence and
embodies absolute trust in God's partnership with
him and through him, he himself becomes a sign or
sacrament of God's Providence within and among the
people he serves.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monsignor Daniel Trapp is a priest of the
Archdiocese of Detroit. He holds a Doctorate
in Dogmatic Theology from the Athenaeum
Sant' Anselmo. He has taught at Sacred Heart
Major Seminary's School of Theology since
1989 and has been pastor of St. Augustine/St.
Monica parish in Detroit since 1996. He has
served as Spiritual Director of the School of
Theology of Sacred Heart since 1995.



DISCERNING A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

Sr. Maribeth Howell, OP

WHERE IS RELIGIOUS LIFE GOING?

"Are you getting any vocations? How many? How old are they? Do you really think religious life has a future? Don't you think religious life has had its day? Why don't you just let your Associates take over? After all, that's the way things are moving. That's the future!" These are but a few of the questions and remarks that many Vocation and Formation personnel in both women's and men's congregations hear regularly. While these and other questions raised about the future of religious life may be legitimate, they seem to overlook what is at the core of Christian life: a call. Profession within a religious congregation is a response to a call, a call from God to intensify our baptismal commitment. This is the nature of vocation, every vocation, whether that vocation is to married life, single life, ordained priesthood, or consecrated life. A conscious response to God's call is an intensification of the Sacrament of Baptism. The implications of this statement are most significant.

WHERE AM I GOING?

Such an understanding of the Christian life implies that God invites each person to live her or his life in a particular way. Throughout history, even until today, many people refer to this invitation as "finding" or "following God's will." Although this is certainly not an inappropriate expression, it can convey that God is keeping a secret from us and that our primary task in life is to discover that secret, live it, and if and when we are able to do that, we will please God. In volume three of her monumental study of religious life, Sandra Schneiders writes: "The will of God, however, is not some heteronomous imposition of divine commands. It is God's loving self-gift to humanity, for our good... The will of God is a lure, a lodestar, drawing us forward through the challenges and opportunities, the sufferings and joys of earthly life toward the Resurrection life to which we are called" (Schneiders, 565).

While many people may be perfectly comfortable with the question “How do I know/follow God’s will for me?” others may find it more inviting to reflect on one of these two questions: “What is God’s desire for me?” or “How do I discern/come to know God’s Providence for me?” In essence, all three of these questions are concerned with the same issue. All three questions are interested in living life well, living life in a way that is attuned to the God who has created us, called us each by name, and who continues to love us without measure.

How do we come to know what God desires? Though none of us can fully understand the ways of God, nor can we predict how, when, or where God may reveal God’s self to us, probably the most helpful disposition we can have and nurture is that of a listening heart. In the Hebrew Scriptures the heart is understood quite differently than how most Westerners of the 21st Century are inclined to think of the heart. Erase all thoughts of Hallmark cherubs aiming their arrows at the hearts of love’s next victims! While the Hebrew Scriptures do recognize that the heart is an important organ, hidden and inaccessible, it is also perceived as that place within a person where decisions, both mental and spiritual, are made. And so we hear the psalmist pray: Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts (Ps 139:23). The heart, in the Scriptures, is also the home of our feelings, those of joy and sorrow, as well as those of courage and fear. A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken (Prov 15:13).

Reference to a listening heart, which is central to discernment, is found in 1 Kgs 3, where God appears to Solomon in a dream and tells Solomon to ask for anything he desires. After a few verses Solomon gets around to asking God for what he wants most deeply. The NRSV translates Solomon’s response as “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” A more literal translation of the Hebrew text would be give your servant a listening heart (see the NABRE translation and the footnote to 1 Kgs 3:9 in JPS). The next two verses read: It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding

to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind (= heart); no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.” In this passage we see that the heart can function in a manner that we would much more readily associate with the brain or the mind. But in the Hebrew Scriptures it is the heart that discerns and makes judgments. Recall that tradition associates the gift of wisdom with King Solomon. In Psalm 51 we hear the psalmist pray for this gift: You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Thus, a listening heart is one that “discerns” rightly. It is a disposition of openness to the movements and whisperings of God. We nurture a listening heart by regular personal and communal prayer. Personal prayer keeps us honest. By spending regular time in prayer we become more intimate with God, more honest with God and with ourselves. And while our personal prayer will vary depending upon the particular circumstances of our lives (e.g. a loved one is seriously ill or has died, a treasured friendship has been ruptured, there is tension in our place of work or ministry, etc.), it is the “practice” or habit of personal prayer that is important. It is essential that we “show up” for prayer on a regular basis if we are to maintain a listening heart. Such a heart will be attuned to the many and diverse ways that God will speak to us throughout each day of our lives.

DISCERNMENT IN COMMUNITY

Communal prayer is also a necessary element in maintaining a listening heart, for God has created us not to be isolated individuals, but to be members of the human family, members of the Body of Christ. For many, if not most Christians, the primary form of communal prayer is the celebration of Eucharist. It is here, in the celebration of God’s outpouring love, that we most clearly identify ourselves as members of Christ’s Body, the Church. A second form of communal prayer to which Christians are invited is the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office or Prayer of the Church. Morning and evening prayer, the two hinges of the Office, were never intended to be the exclusive prayer of clerics, monastics, and professed religious.

Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that “Whenever we pray Lauds or Vespers, we take on a universal voice. We are no longer just a private individual praying; we are the voice, body and soul of the Earth itself,



continuing the high priesthood of Christ, offering prayers and entreaties, aloud and in silent tears, to God for the sake of the world" (Rolheiser, 2013). This form of communal prayer takes us outside of our own little worlds, awakens us to the cries of the world, and allows us to be in solidarity with all humankind. As the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World declares: "The joys and hope, the griefs and anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

If our desire is to know God's desire for us, tending to our listening heart is paramount. Ignoring the movements, the naggings, the invitations of our heart, is the surest way to avoid growth in the spiritual life. However, if we do choose to nurture our listening heart by the practice of personal and communal prayer, then we can trust that God's desire for us will indeed be revealed. Befriending faithfulness, trust, and patience is also most advisable.

THROUGH DIS-EASE TO COMFORT

When an individual is drawn to religious life, and in the early stages of exploration into religious communities, this draw may take the form of

"curiosity." It is wise therefore, to find a good confidant or mentor. This person may be a trusted friend or colleague, a priest, or a professed religious. What is important is that the person in discernment is comfortable with this confidant or mentor. If the individual in discernment has not had experience with a spiritual guide or companion, then it is essential to establish such a relationship with someone who can help care for the listening heart. Margaret Guenther compares the role of the spiritual guide/director to that of the midwife and writes of those on the spiritual quest: "Men and women of all ages and life experiences may sense a call, not necessarily a vocation to the ordained ministry, but simply the awareness that God expects them to do something with their lives. What? Sometimes they merely experience a pervasive but definable spiritual dis-ease which has nothing to do with pathology, but aches and itches until help is sought" (Guenther, 90). The role of the spiritual companion/midwife is to attend to this dis-ease and help the seeker grow in comfort with how God is moving in her or his life. When discerning a call, a trusted spiritual companion is invaluable.

The majority of women and men entering religious congregations today have not had the experience of eight or twelve years of Catholic education and even of those individuals who have spent many of their

years in Catholic schools, relatively few have had significant contact with professed Sisters, Brothers, or Priests. A young woman who recently entered a congregation of Sisters asserts that in her twelve years of Catholic schooling (eight in grade school and four in college) she never had a woman religious as a teacher, despite the fact that both educational institutions were sponsored by women's religious communities. It would seem that a significant challenge to religious congregations today is to address these questions: "How do we help women and men to learn about religious life? How do we make it possible for them to seriously discern a call to this life when so many people have had little or no exposure to professed religious?" If congregations believe that religious life has a future, then it is imperative that they address these questions. As with most every other imaginable quest, people are turning to the internet for assistance. A former student, who grew up in St. Louis and attended Catholic schools for twelve years before getting a Bachelor's degree from an outstanding secular university in another state, when feeling drawn to religious life, scoured the internet for information. He ended up applying to a men's congregation whose House of Studies was less than 20 miles from where he had grown up! The young man had had no exposure whatsoever to this community and yet felt drawn to them by what he had read about them online. One very popular online site is Vision Vocation Network, a publication of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Here there is a wealth of information about numerous women's and men's religious congregations. There is even a survey that individuals may take that is intended to assist them in finding congregations that seem to match their interests and ministerial preferences.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCERNING A VOCATION TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

Are you inclined to seek out ways in which you can be of service to your neighbor, especially in those instances where you see injustice and abuse of human dignity?

Does the Gospel both compel you and disturb you in a way that you find both challenging and life giving? Although there may be aspects of both married and single life that you find appealing, are there other indicators in your life that point to the possibility

that neither of these life choices would be completely satisfying for you?

Are you drawn to share more deeply with others your spiritual quest?

Do you look forward to praying and sharing your faith in a community of women or men who have devoted their lives to the mission of Jesus?

Do you believe you are capable of investing yourself more deeply in self-examination? Are you willing to engage in a period of formation that will require you to take the discernment process even more seriously? Do you find yourself drawn to grow in your relationship with God in a way that is counter-cultural? Central to this question is a second question: Are you ready to explore deeply the meaning of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a world that is inclined to view the vows and often any kind of commitment as passé?

Are you open to engaging in a process of "mutual discernment?" If you do enter the formation process of a religious congregation, you must understand that you will now be discerning with the community. Do you feel peace and excitement (a little fear is normal) about moving forward in this quest?

THE SEARCH GOES ON...

If you have responded "yes" to most of the above questions, then this would seem to indicate that it is time to proceed further in your exploration and discernment process. It is an exciting and life-giving journey, but it is extremely important that you also find the "right fit," the right congregation. As mentioned above, the Vision Vocation Network is a very fine place to pursue your exploration into religious congregations. Each religious order has a particular charism and even within each order (e.g. Benedictines, Capuchins, Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, etc.) each congregation has a particular expression of how and where the congregation lives out their charism.

Although you are likely to experience some frustration as you explore different religious congregations, this is a time to exercise the virtue of patience. This is a most important part of your journey. When you find that community, those women or men with whom your soul resonates and

where you can say "I am home," your heart will be at peace and like Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures you will be able to say: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Sr. Maribeth Howell quotes the insight of Sr. Sandra Schneiders that "the will of God is a lure, a lodestar, drawing us forward through the challenges and opportunities...toward Resurrection..." Do I have this dynamic appreciation of God's will in my own life? How might I help others to see God's will with a "listening heart"?
2. In the article, Sr. Maribeth reminds us that authentic personal discernment can happen only by way of reference to the community and wider Church. Have I found that to be true in my experience? In our individualistic culture, how might we help people of all ages see the need for communal elements of discernment?
3. Sister Maribeth articulates two specific challenges for religious congregations, questions that also apply for all of us who have a loving concern for the future of religious life:

How do we help women and men learn about religious life?

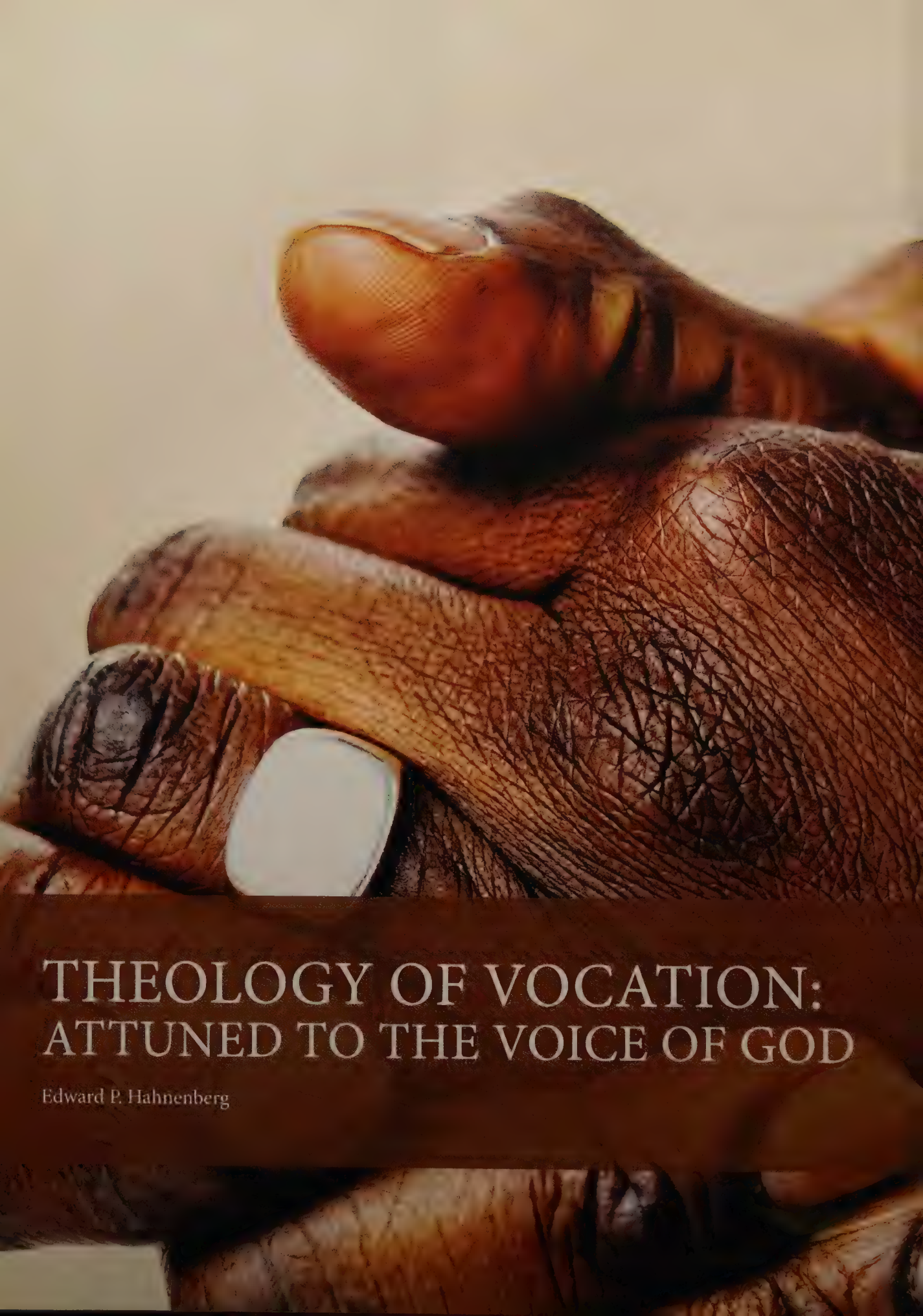
How do we help people with little exposure to religious life to discern a call to such a life?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR


Sister Maribeth Howell, OP, is a Dominican Sister of Adrian, MI. She received her PhD and STD from the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven, Belgium. She has taught at Kenrick Seminary and Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, MO, and is currently Professor of Biblical Studies at St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Wickliffe, OH.

Prior to returning to teaching at St. Mary, Sr. Maribeth served as Director of Formation for her Congregation from 2011-2015. Regularly she gives workshops and days of reflection. She is the translator of the Psalms in *Dominican Praise, A Provisional Book of Prayer for Dominican Women* and has authored a variety of articles on the Hebrew Scriptures.



THEOLOGY OF VOCATION: ATTUNED TO THE VOICE OF GOD

Edward P. Hahnenberg



“Tell me,” prompts the poet Mary Oliver, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Over the centuries, the Christian tradition has asked this question in the language of vocation. And in the years since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have become more and more accustomed to a broad and inclusive understanding of God’s call.

God calls every single one of us. And God calls us in a variety of ways. In today’s Church, vocation can refer to one’s ministry. It can also mean one’s state of life. It can also describe the more general call to discipleship—what Vatican II termed “the universal vocation to holiness.” Our vocations are multiple, interrelated, and overlapping. They include lifelong decisions and more modest commitments. They evolve. They change. But what every vocation shares is a sense of meaning that comes when we live our lives in tune to God’s invitation.

THE CALL OF CHRIST

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus issued a call. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew fishing along the shore. He called out to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). In the Gospel of Mark, the men responded immediately. They left their nets and followed him. A little later they came across two brothers, James and John, fixing their own fishing nets. Jesus called them. They too dropped everything and followed Jesus.

The Gospel of John, however, suggests a more gradual response to Christ’s call. At the very beginning of the gospel, John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to two disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” When they approached him, Jesus issued not a command but a question: “What are you looking for?” Here the call of Christ came as an invitation to these two men to reflect on their own experiences and their own deepest desires. They responded only that they wanted to know more, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus replied, “Come, and you will see” (John 1:38-39). Time with Jesus transformed these men into disciples. They would go out and invite others to come and see.

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. This experience transformed these frightened followers into bold missionaries, who went out to spread the Good News of Christ to the whole world.

One of the most important of these early missionaries was Paul. Paul (or Saul as he was known) was not with the apostles at that first Pentecost. Acts of the Apostles describes his call coming later, and describes it in dramatic fashion. Saul was literally knocked to the ground as Christ spoke to him from heaven. In a blinding flash, Saul became Paul. In a moment, the enemy became the advocate.

In his own writings, however, Paul described his calling in the language of Isaiah or Jeremiah: “But when [God], who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:15-16). Paul seemed to place his conversion within the longer context of God’s plan for his life. Only in hindsight did Paul see what God had always intended for him. Throughout his letters, the notion of call appears again and again. Paul described Jesus as “the one who calls.” He referred to Christians as “those who are called.” Indeed the New Testament word for “church” is *ekklesia*—which means “the assembly of those who are called.” The whole Church, and everyone in it, is called to follow Christ.

VARIETY IN VOCATION

Everyone has a vocation! After centuries of neglect, Catholics have reclaimed this ancient biblical truth. God calls every single one of us.

Within this inclusive view, we continue to talk about vocation in a variety of ways. Take for example the definition offered by the United States Catholic

“Vocation” is applied to at least three different levels: the call to holiness and discipleship, the call to a state of life and the call to serve. These levels are interrelated and often overlap in the life of an individual.”



Catechism for Adults:

Vocation: The term given to the call to each person from God; everyone has been called to holiness and eternal life, especially in Baptism. Each person can also be called more specifically to the priesthood or to religious life, to married life, and to single life, as well as to a particular profession or service.

In this single definition, “vocation” is applied to at least three different levels: the call to holiness and discipleship, the call to a state of life, and the call to serve. These levels are interrelated and often overlap in the life of an individual.

Years ago, two theologians, Marie Theresa Coombs and Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI, decided that when Catholics talk about vocation, they usually use the word in one of these three ways. Vocation can refer to:

1. Who God calls me to be
2. How God calls me to live
3. What God calls me to do.

The first speaks to our self-identity, the unique way each of us embodies and lives out the universal call to holiness. The second speaks to our state of life, whether that be the ordained, the consecrated, or the lay life. The third speaks to our ministry, the particular way each of us is called to serve God

and others. All three are important. All three are interrelated. All three come together in the lives of those serving or seeking ways to serve the mission of Christ.

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

The Second Vatican Council taught that, prior to any particular vocation, there is a universal call to salvation, discipleship, and holiness. Vatican II dedicated an entire chapter of its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church to the “universal call to holiness.” There the council proclaimed with confidence: “Therefore, all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle’s saying: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’” (Lumen Gentium 39).

For many of us the language of “holiness” can be off-putting. It can evoke images of pious churchgoers or heroic saints. It can seem distant from our ordinary, everyday lives. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. As Vatican II makes clear, holiness is, at its root, “the perfection of charity” (Lumen Gentium 40). The word perfection implies growth. Charity means love. Thus to be holy is to grow in love. This is our first and foremost calling. And it extends to all.

But just because the call to holiness is universal does

not mean that it is generic. The call extends to all. But it is not the same for everyone.

This point was brought home to me several years ago when I returned to my old high school for my younger sister's graduation.

Before commencement, a baccalaureate mass was held in the white frame church next to the school. All the seniors arrived early wearing their caps and gowns. They processed in at the start of mass. They filled the pews in front. Several of them served as lectors, gift bearers, and eucharistic ministers.

When it was time for the homily, Father Charlie came down from the altar and stood before the seniors. They sat there, proud as peacocks on the day of their graduation, with all of us family and friends beaming behind them.

Father began, "What a beautiful day! What a happy day! There is so much to celebrate and enjoy today."

He continued, "But as your pastor, I feel that it is my responsibility to remind you graduates—on this day—of an important truth."

"Your parents never wanted you."

He said it with a straight face. But we all laughed. And after we quieted down, Father Charlie repeated solemnly:

"Your parents never wanted you."

He went on, "Now don't get me wrong, maybe your parents wanted a baby. I am sure they wanted a healthy baby. Maybe they wanted a boy or they wanted a girl."

"But your parents never wanted . . . you."

After a pause, he said, "Only God wanted . . . you."

Father Charlie said it again and again, pointing to each individual graduate in the front row, "Only God wanted . . . you."

I feel like I have spent almost twenty years now trying to take those words seriously. What does it mean to believe that God wanted . . . me? Not me without all my faults and imperfections. Not me without all my insecurities and inner doubts. God wanted me. Just as I am.

God's call to me is rooted in God's love for me—a love that is utterly personal. According to our Catholic faith, the billions and billions of human beings spread around the world and scattered across history are not the result of some mass production scheme. We are the astonishing gift of a God who chooses to love again and again and again. Each of us is the result of a unique act of love that has never been seen before and will never be seen again. As the story of Fr. Charlie reminds us, God wants every single one of us.

Centuries ago, St. Augustine prayed, "By loving me, Lord, you have made me lovable." Discovering who God wants me to be begins in a basic act of self-acceptance. God loved me into existence. God not only designed me, God desired me. And because of that I am lovable.

HEARING THE HARMONY

Too often we imagine God's call as "out there" and apart from us. We treat our vocation as some kind of riddle that we have to decipher or some secret message that we have to decode. Such an approach transforms God's plan into a set of arbitrary instructions—directions for life that are hidden from view.

The twentieth-century spiritual writer Thomas Merton suggested another way. In a brief essay from his collection *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote: "For me to be a saint means to be myself." To be holy, Merton argued, is not to imitate someone else's ideal. It is not to look for my vocation "out there." Rather, holiness is the slow unfolding of one's own God-given identity. It is the process of coming to accept the

call of God written in my heart before I was born. According to Merton, what separates human beings from the rest of God's creation is that we can choose to be what God created us to be. We are free to sin, but sin is simply a turning away from our true self. "Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please."

Discernment, then, is not a spiritual treasure hunt. It is less about looking out and more about listening within. To discover a calling is to hear a certain harmony between who I am as a child of God, on the one hand, and how I live and what I do, on the other. When faith-filled people say that they discovered their vocation, they are not saying that they have found some hidden plan. Rather, they are saying that they have felt a profound resonance between their deepest sense of themselves before God and a particular path forward.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Hahnenberg quotes Thomas Merton to the effect that God's desire for each of us is simply to "be" the person He created: our vocation and our holiness flow from that truth. Do I see how my own strengths and limitations are my vocation? Do I believe this is also true of others? How might I help others reach the simple but profound conclusion that ultimately "being" is more important than "doing?"
2. Dr. Hahnenberg's book on vocation to ministry is entitled "Awakening" because his thesis is that "vocation" is discovered as we listen within our hearts and hear a certain harmony between how I live and what I do. When and how have I found that stirring of "inner music" in my heart? How am I still in stages of "awakening?" How might I help others "awaken" to greater awareness and joyful acceptance of their particular vocation?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward P. Hahnenberg is the Jack and Mary Jane Breen Chair in Catholic Systematic Theology at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio. This article is an excerpt from his book *Theology for Ministry: An Introduction for Lay Ministers*, available from Liturgical Press. Reprinted with permission.

WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY TO BE A RELIGIOUS TODAY?

Fr. John C. Wronski, SJ



The greatest joy of my Jesuit life is knowing that Jesus loves me, a sinner, and calls me to be his friend and companion. Sharing Jesus' friendship with others is at the heart of my priesthood and

my current work as an administrator at Nativity Prep, where low-income middle school boys prepare for high school, college, and a lifetime of generous service. Since my earliest days as a Jesuit, I have found that the gospel comes to life in a dramatic way for me when I am drawn into friendship with people who are poor and marginalized. Perhaps this explains why my work at Nativity Prep has filled me with so much life and love over the past eight years.

Every morning at 7:30 I take my post at the school's front door and greet each student with a handshake and a smile. At 8:00 we assemble in the school chapel for prayer and announcements. I like to call this daily morning ritual my "holy hour." The graces I receive through the boys each morning carry me through the day's whirlwind of administrative duties: leading staff meetings, strategizing with trustees and donors, planning retreat days for faculty, paying the bills,

fretting over the leaky roof, and sometimes even emptying the cafeteria trash can or unloading the faculty room dish washer.

Amidst even the most mundane tasks of a school president, I find tremendous joy in knowing that my labors with Jesus are making a critical difference in the lives of the boys I greet at the front door each morning. My ministry is the work of "faith doing justice" preached by so many of my Jesuit heroes through their lives of prayerful gratitude and generous service. For a Jesuit educator, nothing can compare to the satisfaction of seeing a former student grow up to become a man for others, especially when the obstacles along the way to adulthood seem so insurmountable, as they often are in Boston's toughest inner-city neighborhoods.

Through scripture and sacrament, Jesus reaches out to me in loving friendship each day. But perhaps even more profoundly, he touches me through friendships with my students, colleagues and all the generous benefactors who make our tuition-free school possible. As a Jesuit novice, 20 years ago, my dream was to grow in deep friendship with Jesus and his many friends who are poor and crucified. Through my ministry at Nativity Prep that dream has come true, and I am filled with the joy of the gospel. *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam!*

"...nothing can compare to the satisfaction of seeing a former student grow up to become a man for others"



A HEART ON FIRE

Aaron Pierre, SJ

October 15, 2015 - The prison guards guide our six-person retreat team down the chilling corridor of a “supermax” prison in Northern California. We’re doing cell-by-cell visits to inmates in solitary confinement. I’m struck by the eerie silence of existence beyond the whitewashed cinderblock. Within these walls nearly 1,800 men wake each morning to go about their day with little sunshine or human contact.

Although I’ve visited three cells already, I’m only halfway attentive, still reeling from this harsh reality. The men are on “lockdown” 23 hours a day. They spend their one hour of “recreation” time alone pacing a 25 ft. x 10 ft. corridor. Meals are passed through the cell door. No communication and no visits.

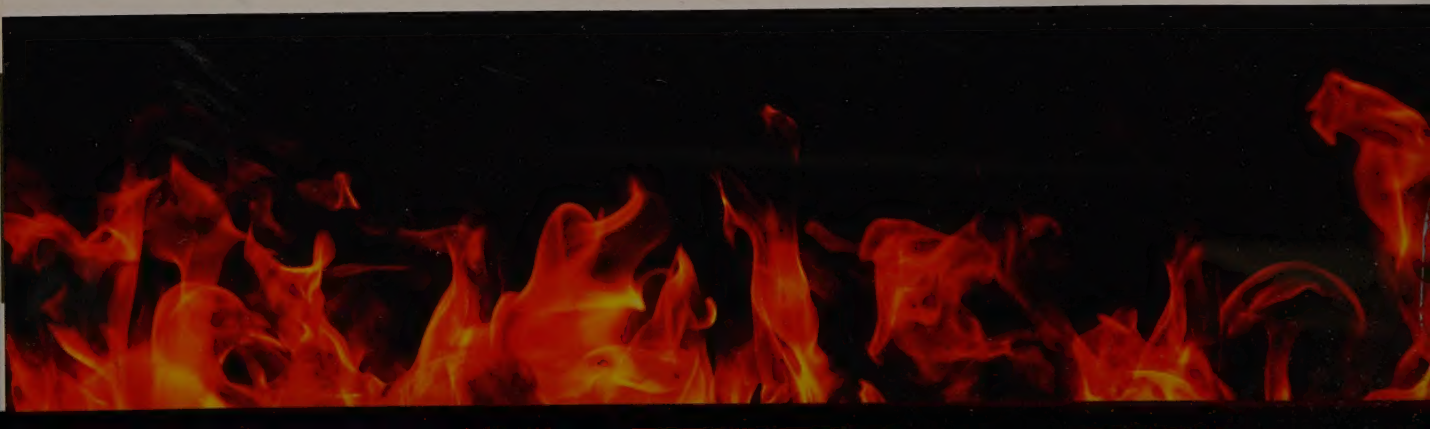
With every move I feel painfully aware of myself, uncomfortably conscious of the differences that seem to separate me from these inmates. I’m a Midwestern white male from a middle-class Catholic family who has been privileged with a quality education, boundless opportunities, and participation in a successful religious order. My life is marked with gratitude, yes, but in this moment, awareness of my privilege steals my attention. Not knowing what to do with my hands, I jam them into the front of the

bulletproof vest all visitors are obligated to wear. A safety precaution, I’m told.

We are ushered into the next unit. I approach a cell but the grating on the front makes it difficult to see. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I’m struck by a strange familiarity. The walls are littered with posters of the Green Bay Packers and the Notre Dame Fighting Irish.

The man inside approaches me hesitatingly with a look that searches my intentions – visitors are extremely rare in these units. I stumble through a quick introduction, and in my excitement I blurt out: “You’ll never believe this, but I was born and raised in Green Bay and I went to college at Notre Dame!”

He lights up: “Not many cheeseheads out here in Cali!” As he dives into his thoughts on the upcoming Packer season it doesn’t take long to move beyond my limited sports knowledge. I shift the conversation to Notre Dame. One of his uncles attended the university years ago. In two steps he’s standing next to the built-in cinderblock shelf, pointing out several books about the University and the football team. He eagerly shares some details about its history that I had yet to learn. No question, he’s a fan. The guards interrupt. We only had eight minutes



to visit, and they're up. Before I walk out of this man's life forever, we pause, looking each other in the eye, briefly allowing the moment to sink in. "Thank you," he says with a sincere smile, "I needed this."

I needed that encounter too, maybe more than he.

When I began working in restorative justice in Los Angeles last summer, my mind was full of stereotypical images of inmates I'd seen on the news. These high security prisons are described as housing California's "worst of the worst" criminals: killers, thieves, and gang leaders. Men entirely defined by their criminal actions.

Unintentionally, yet with great authenticity, this particular inmate offered me a glimpse of his humanity. Though our conversation was brief, our connection reframed my approach to the work that summer. Through this man's openness, God revealed Godself and loudly communicated to me that I'm not all that different from the people caught up in our criminal justice system. With God's grace, I strive to be unencumbered by differences and instead to find those inevitable points of human connection that eclipse the imaginary chasms which separate us from one another.

The guards interrupt.

We only had eight minutes to visit, and they're up.

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A PRAYER FOR ALL VOCATIONS

